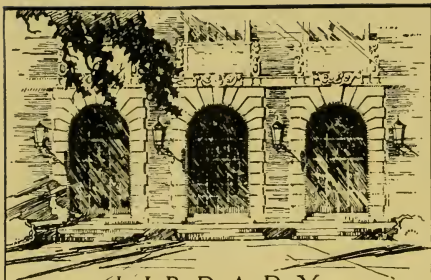


*DUST
BEFORE
THE
WIND*





LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823

C879d

v. 1

loc 2185
157.

**DUST
BEFORE
THE
WIND**



DUST BEFORE THE WIND

A Novel

By

MAY CROMMELIN

In Two Volumes

Volume 1

LONDON:

BLISS, SANDS & FOSTER,

CRAVEN STREET, STRAND.

1894.



823
C879d
v. 1

DUST BEFORE THE WIND.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

"'Tis true 'tis pity; and pity 'tis
'Tis true."

BY way of preface, let it be understood that this story is only written because it is said to be true.

Surely, in the affairs of daily life, an ounce of fact is worth a pound of fiction. "But that is not art," cry the crowd. There are many strange tales we all know, which, if they were written, no one would believe.

Pro says, confidentially: You see, my dear friend, when you write a story you must make it seem like ordinary life. Now the end of

your tragedy, for instance. It might happen so in a Greek play, but in real life——

Con : But that is just the gist of the matter. It did so happen. Why suppress all that is extraordinary in daily existence? If, on the contrary, we note it carefully, as doctors and other scientific men do facts that come under their observation, we shall get nearer what we infants in the night are crying for—the Light of Truth.

Pro (sarcastically) : Perhaps you would like a fact I can vouch for also, as being strictly true. It is a recent Irish story. Two young fellows who were moonlighters suspected a “boy” of informing upon them. So they asked him to come out for a walk one evening and murdered him in a lonely valley, where two roads met. A year or so later their father was thrown from his gig, driving by that same spot, and killed. When the old priest heard of it—probably knowing the previous story through the confessional—he raised his hands, exclaiming : “The ways of God are wonderful !”

Con : Well—— ?

Pro ; Well, there is another moral for you.

To me it is pure coincidence. But you will see the finger of Providence, most probably, in it. The Jews were more poetic when they imagined an angel of the Lord, with a drawn sword, stopping Balaam's ass.

Con (vexed) : I was not pointing any moral. Has life a moral, beyond the lessons of practising common sense and honesty? also of reverence for Nature's laws, for, if broken, the father's sins are naturally visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.

Pro : There I agree. Up to that point the wicked flourish like a green bay tree ; and they do not often perish suddenly and come to a fearful end. On the contrary, they go down to their graves in peace, as David likewise remarked, leaving riches and children behind them. I confess to reflecting sometimes that if I had had the ordering of this world, I could have made a better job of it.

Con : It all does seem a frightful muddle at times ; and I get very depressed when the apparent injustice of things strikes me. If we are in a great school, we should wish to see the master deal out prizes and punishments.

Pro : Precisely. Otherwise one may come to think His existence a myth, invented by some wise monitors to keep the naughty boys in order.

Con (with eagerness) : So you acknowledge the value of signs that eternal justice is working among us—though we may not recognize it often. Were not steam, electricity, with us always, and did we guess their presence a century ago? “The mills of God grind slowly.” A thousand years in His sight are as one day. If we are creatures of eternity, what matters time, if the justice that is our right comes at last?

Pro : Humph. Being sinful myself, I confess to a weakness towards mercy. Your story preaches—an eye for an eye. But have we not had a Christian upbringing, which started us in life on a higher plane than the Jew whose noble wish (which we read out on Sundays) was to wash his footsteps in the blood of his enemies. Your sinner, a woman, is punished remorselessly; not so the man. Quite true to life; only as to justice——

Con : With the measure she meted was it

measured to her again. She had ceased to love her neighbour, and become dangerous to humanity. I have not made the man so. You understand that only the main outline of the tale is true; the characters of even the principal actors, long dead, as also the scenery, are imaginary.

Pro : And you call it justice that the innocent should suffer for the guilty ! How old myths survive ! How many virgins have been offered in sacrifice to appease offended powers, from Jephthah's daughter, and the victims in Greek story, to the Rhine maidens devoured by the terrible worm ?

Con : Is death a punishment or a blessing ? I, like the poor, rather hope it will be a change for the better. But what more poignant anguish is there than to know our sins have hurt those dear to us ? This woman had no pity left but for her own children. Her sentence was that of David.

Pro : True ; it is an intensely human cry. Strike me, but spare the child ! “ Would God I had died for thee, my son ! ” Only—I warn you, the public won't like the end.

Con (with dejection) : Perhaps not.

Pro : Can't you change it ? Don't have any painful incident. Let the girl escape.

Con : No. I repeat, my only reason for telling the story at all is my belief in its truth. It has haunted me.

Pro : Well, I have given you my advice. If you must take your own way, all I hope is that I may be wrong and you right.

Con : Thank you. The closing words of the second Book of Maccabeus come to my mind. "And if I have done well, and as is fitting the story, it is that which I desired ; but if slenderly and meanly, it is that which I could attain unto. . . . And here shall be an end."

* * * * *

This story begins a quarter of a century ago. Only twenty-five years after all. Most of us can look back as far as that. Five and twenty years of revolving summers and winters ; of days and nights which merge into an impression of alternate light and shade. How short a time it seems !

No doubt, to the actors concerned, the following scene would come back after even

such a long interval in their lives "as if it had all happened yesterday."

Two persons were standing close together in a room.

Let us leave them so a few seconds, and look at the background of the picture. It is merely the drawing-room of a middle-class London house. The wearisome L-shape of such a room is familiar ; its front windows looking on a dull grey street, the back one on a strip of soot-blackened garden. But a woman's taste has done much to change the commonplace apartment, striving to cheat herself with some slight semblance of the luxury and beauty of surroundings which her being craved.

A Moorish arch of Oriental woodwork broke the stiff line of wall between the two rooms. Cairene pierced shutters and toned glass filled the windows, so that there was a twilight effect in the interior, save for little rays of autumn sunlight stealing through the apertures of the carving. In this daylight gloom water-jugs of gaudy coloured Tunis pottery, priceless old Dresden china, and Chinese jars, huge as those in which the Forty Thieves were hid—suggesting

the voyages of some seafaring ancestor of the house, who had carelessly brought back foreign treasures now worth the dowry of a poor man's daughter—were disposed just where each looked best, but without the least regard to their respective value.

Here and there Indian brass pots of graceful shapes, but no other worth beyond former usefulness, long forgotten, rubbed shoulders with brethren of high degree—chased silver jugs or gold inlaid vases. These gleamed with a rich and pleasing effect from dark backgrounds of oak, carved in Tudor days, when workmen loved their craft, and cut deep and true into thick panels.

The mistress of this house had evidently an original mind, a rare gift among the inhabitants of that dull square. She valued things for their own beauty, for the pleasure they gave her eyes, not for the number of coins of which they had lightened the purse.

Rich City people sometimes came to the house, and these were either contemptuous, or downright indignant with Mr. Morice's wife for the disrespect flagrantly shown to wealth in "this

mad jumble of things," as they termed her objects of art. Some years afterwards they unanimously declared Stella's room always betrayed an ill-balanced mind. The furnishing of their own houses had been done (executed was the correct word) by a firm of old-established upholsterers.

In spite of this criticism, Stella Morice knew the good of money, and piqued herself on extracting its full value out of every shilling of her very ordinary allowance. Her husband was quite generous to her, that she granted; but permitted no extravagance. In her secret mind this very prudence was monotonous. Why, if one only spent fourpence a day on daily papers, it was an occasional joy to waste a shilling—if only once in a blue moon.

To return to the room in question. The air was heavy with the fragrance of costly flowers massed in big china bowls, with a suspicion of incense, too, and the faintest lingering odour of cigarettes. Not a seat here but was a delightful lounge, piled with cushions; while one's feet sank in the deep pile of the carpet.

Yet perhaps the prettiest feature of all was a

mere handful of autumn foliage—just some twigs to which their summer bravery still clung in leaves of glorious russet and gold. These were placed in a tall Venetian glass carelessly, yet with such consummate skill that one's eyes always wandered back from all other objects in the room to that spot with admiration. Nothing extraordinary in this, it may be thought. Still the effect, however easily procured, was so striking as to make a spectator resolve immediately: I shall stop on my way home and buy some autumn leaves, and put them in a trumpet-shaped vase, just like that. Ah, but would the effect be the same? Therein lies the secret of the matter.

Nowadays, such a room as has been described above is by no means uncommon in London. But at that time visitors to the house, these mostly lawyers and their wives, were wont to enter gingerly, pretending to feel their way in the twilight. Afterwards they asked each other, with raised eyebrows and in significant tones, "How did you like Mrs. Morice's drawing-room? Extraordinary, is it not? So crammed with rubbishy foreign things, and dreadfully

dark. If one only pushes one's armchair back, something is sure to be upset."

Mrs. Morice defended her taste against the candour of outspoken old friends with a gay frankness that rather shocked these critics.

"A woman's looks are her best dowry; so they are fools who don't study them. And all artistic background is the casket of the jewel."

Upon this some disagreeable acquaintances lectured the younger neighbour solemnly on vanity, hinting that, once married, a woman should only care to please her husband. In his eyes, she might be assured, economy in dress and frugal household expenses would make her more pleasing than any fine gowns and extravagance. On the other hand, the wife of his bosom would, of course, be always thought by her lord, in virtue of his marriage vows, more fair than Venus, and a better manager than Martha.

Such speakers were mostly ponderous matrons, whose minds were fed mainly on the weekly sermon, which seemed to produce as heavy results, intellectually, as did the Sunday roast beef and Yorkshire pudding on their bodily persons.

They were tastelessly clothed, but paid their dressmakers' bills punctually for expensive silk gowns of black or neutral shades, which they termed "nice and quiet." They were almost certainly good women—kind, religious, but with neglected graces of person, who had dropped their piano playing when they married, they said. They liked early breakfasts, long walks, discussing their servants' characters; also they liked rosewood furniture, white lace curtains, and a plague of what were once called, vulgarly, antimacassars.

"Good! Yes, I believe they are good, according to their own ideas," declared young Mrs. Morice. "I pride myself on being always fair-minded; but they are so dull. They dislike change, like Chinese. As to music, a canary would shame them; and bees could give them lessons on the love of what is beautiful. What is the use of prating about our British virtues? Why, most other nations, and all animals, show as much and more affection to their young; and don't quarrel so disagreeably with their relations. Goodness does not consist in sweeping all pleasant books and newspapers into a

cupboard on Sundays, and going to sleep between services because early dinner has disagreed with one's digestion. And if it is so heinous to be gay and like fine feathers, then the birds must be the embodied souls of pretty women. . . . Yes, I have been heartily weary of my husband's set these six married years of my life. Before that I was in the schoolroom, and my parents were not well off——

“Oh, I do so long to be out in the stream!” Stella exclaimed, at the very moment when this story opens. “I want to leave the stagnant pool, and feel the life and rush of the river; to—to——”

“Be swept over the falls,” answered a man's deeper voice, with a warning underlying the half-joking tone. “Remember the fable of the little earthen pot that went to pieces by trying to swim in company with the brass ones.”

A silence followed of some moments' duration.

The man and woman were standing almost in the middle of the room. A tall screen, flanked by a tropical group of palms and a massed undergrowth of ferns, would have hidden them, however, from the sudden obser-

vation of any one entering. They were each looking close in the other's face ; but as if they had often so looked before and knew what was written there by heart. Their hands were laid on each other's shoulders.

The man was an ordinarily good-looking, fresh-coloured, and fair-haired Englishman, with a small bronzed moustache. There was an air of well-being about him, due to the irreproachable make of his clothes, also to daily high living. At a glance one recognized a personage (not merely a person) who smoked the finest cigars and drank the best wines as a matter of course. There was pride in the squaring of his shoulders ; it lay concealed in the ease of manner calmly conscious of never feeling socially inferior to any one excepting royalty. Perhaps his grey eye was cold ; his expression might be a trifle cruel when crossed. But his voice was charming, soothing in its soft modulation, caressing when he pleased.

So these two stood, the slighter feminine form seeming to vibrate with emotion.

What of the woman ? She was tall and slender, with the softly swelling bosom, the

rounded outlines of youth ; her figure would have charmed a bird off the tree, as the Irish saying goes. In face she was not really pretty, rather a *jolie laide*, with high cheek-bones, and a wide yet sweet mouth. But her black hair was wonderfully thick, and piled in fluffy masses on her head, escaping here and there in tiny, attractive tendrils and curls, that tempted the man vaguely with the wish to put them straight, though they were prettier as they were. Then her blue eyes were so big and dark-lashed, the play of her face so changing, her softness, yet *diablerie* of manner so witching, little wonder Lord Middlesex suddenly exclaimed—

“Stella, you certainly are a pretty woman.”

Such joy as flashed up in his companion's whole face at the praise, from him ! Her lips quivered slightly, and, drawing in her breath with happy emotion, she imperceptibly stole yet a little nearer. But perhaps Middlesex did not notice this, for, loosing his hold gently, he moved a chair. Then in a cheery voice that gave the impression of a fresh breeze stirring the warm fragrant atmosphere, he said—

“Come and sit down.”

The poor woman felt her blood run backward (though ever so little) in her veins, a slight weakness stole through her limbs, and a hysterical swelling of disappointment rose in her throat. Poor, one may call her, for it was pitiful to see the forced smile she at once strove to call up, and the timid obedience with which she moved after her lover. It was the action of a slave of love, not a queen.

The vacant seat nearest Lord Middlesex was a carved armchair with velvet cushions, placed in a nook that suited its cumbersome if comfortable dimensions. Unconsciously as it seemed, with the magnetized look still in her eyes, Mrs. Morice dragged this forward almost to touch his chair.

"Why, you are displacing all the furniture, Stella," observed the visitor good-humouredly, with a smile. "I thought you were so particular, never to allow your charming arrangements to be disturbed."

She silently raised her eyes to his, but did not answer.

"Well, now, what is all this outburst about? What has raised this little storm in your breast against your circle of friends?"

“Don’t call them friends. I hate the whole set!” Stella petulantly exclaimed; “they are such Pharisees. Some of them certainly may be as virtuous and straightlaced as they profess to be, but I *know* one or two others who are whited sepulchres (and rouged, too).”

“They pay a right and proper compliment to virtue, though, by a little tribute of hypocrisy. Why do you smile? The fact of the matter is, most likely, that the women are jealous of you; you should feel flattered.”

“They will be jealous indeed at my going to your mother’s ball to-morrow night,” Mrs. Morice now gleefully answered, her face lighting quickly again. “Fancy, John was so dumfounded he could say nothing at first, when I showed him the card from Lady Middlesex. Then he muttered something about my being unable to go, thank Heaven! because I was in mourning (for his mother still, you know), and betook himself out of the room like a shocked stork, if you can imagine one. But, of course, I *am* going! There was no use in contradicting him then; only you will see me all the same to-morrow night. And, oh, I

have been so wanting to thank you ever since the invitation came. The time has seemed so terribly long since I saw you last."

"Only three weeks, little woman."

"Yes, I know. (And four days," she mentally added.) "Still, so much may happen in three weeks."

Lord Middlesex started very slightly, and stole a look sideways at his companion.

"Why? *Has* anything happened to surprise you greatly?"

"No, nothing, nothing. It has been all as tame as a caged life—my daily seed and water, and pecking at the bars. Still, perhaps one ought to be thankful. With change, things might be worse, you know; and while I have you I have my one great consolation."

Love, utter self-forgetting love that is a raging fever, a madness when it takes such hold of a human soul as it had in this one, surged up in Stella's face like a seventh wave of the tide of emotion that always flooded her being in his presence.

"Yes, things might be worse," replied Middlesex, gravely; and he turned his head

to examine some volumes on the table, partly hidden by some French novels, which he pushed impatiently aside. "Why! what have you got here? The newest revolutionary ideas in religion; agnosticism, materialistic philosophy—I am amazed!"

"They are *his*—John's books; at least, I got them for him," confusedly explained Stella, growing rosy. "I have only just peeped into them here and there."

"Exactly so. I recognize the eminent counsel's book-marker. Quite the sort of thing one would expect Mr. Morice to use."

Lord Middlesex held up teasingly a spray of bramble with golden-bronzed leaves that had lain pressed between the pages. He remembered breaking that spray to please Stella, and pricking his fingers with it, almost four weeks ago, down in the country, near the river.

"Don't be naughty, dear. Put it back like a good boy. I would not lose that for a great deal. It reminds me of such a happy afternoon—the last happy one till to-day."

Middlesex seemed still absorbed in the subject

of the books. He was staring at an open page with a puckered brow.

"I think it is very wrong to look into this sort of book at all, Stella. Why, it is enough to shake the faith you have been brought up in. Don't you think that is very dangerous?"

"If one's faith is so tottering, as you seem to think, it must be a difficult task to keep it from falling like a house of cards," she answered evasively, with a light laugh. Then, assuming an audacious air, suiting a pretty woman meddling with matters too high for her, "But what if these books are in the right, after all? It is such a consoling, reasonable idea that there is no hereafter. Animals and fishes don't expect one, and they suffer pain like us, and are starving sometimes; they are ill-treated by man, and devoured cruelly by each other. It does not seem fair. Why should we have a heaven or hell, if they haven't?" Emboldened by her own argument, Stella added more seriously, "Really, I begin to think that a great deal of what we were taught is either falsehood or fables invented long ago, when, like savages nowadays, our

ancestors had a craving for something to worship—the sun, or moon, or an idol. It helped to make them think they would get rain or slay their enemies. But I have given up supposing that any amount of prayers will change the weather or give us what we long for with all our souls. Then it seems such a chance whether one is what is called *good*. For sometimes circumstances are so dead against us, we can't be ! ”

“ Why—my—dear—girl ! ” in slow, surprised disappointment.

“ Yes, yes ; I mean what I say.” Mrs. Morice's eyes were sparkling, her fine nostrils dilated with strong feeling. “ That is why I don't go to church any longer, because it seems wicked to go and repeat things I can't believe in. And, though it is no affair of mine, as I never come down to breakfast, I do consider it really wrong of John to force the servants to attend prayers every morning. Perhaps it is not their own wish, but they are expected to appear all the same, or the poor creatures would be dismissed, I dare say. I must say I think every one ought to have freedom of conscience, high

or low. And if the maids feel the same, it must be a mockery to them to pretend to be devout."

"I am extremely sorry to hear you say so. . . . For my part, I must say I like *women* to hold to the good old ideas about religion and conduct. With men it is a different affair. We cannot be judged by the same rules; we have far more temptations, less leisure. All the same, I know plenty of good men in their way, who seldom put in an appearance at church. I do not myself go as often as I ought; I don't set up for being religious. But as regards women, as I said before, one's wi—one's mother and sister, and so forth—well, a man likes to feel that they cherish the old ideals and keep the simple faith of their childhood."

The Earl of Middlesex delivered his lecture so earnestly, indeed severely, that his listener grew slowly hot from heart to head. Shamed distress at incurring his blame—and that for the first time in the mad rapturous history of their mutual passion—seemed to exude from her every pore. It was from the pained depth of her heart, foolish, misguided, though it might be,

that Stella Morice cried out, tears rising in her speedwell-blue eyes.

“Don’t suppose, Hugh, that I think more lightly than other women. I believe it is because I think more deeply, and feel far more passionately than most, that these thoughts have come to me. How could I reconcile going to church and saying my prayers with—with our love which is the one happiness of my life?”

Middlesex turned his head and looked down critically at the edge of his boot-sole. She changed her pitiful low cry for a tone of more self-restrained yet reproachful reasoning.

“If you really mean that I ought to follow these sternly virtuous, old-fashioned beliefs, how about all our meetings during the past two years? I am no hypocrite, thank Heaven! as so many women are.”

Middlesex felt and even looked uncomfortable.

“You push an argument so *very* far. There are bounds it is better to recognize silently,” he murmured, in the softest of voices.

But if he had answered instead with brutal frankness, “You are almost immodest in your personalities. It is considered very coarse in

my set to refer disagreeably to past mutual relations," Stella would have felt less blistered; for the gentle superiority of breeding he assumed, that she in her adoration was ready to acknowledge, even to metaphorically falling down and worshipping, would not then have made him appear on so immeasurably higher a level than her passionate middle-class self.

"Perhaps, indeed, we ought to be wiser, now," went on the man, with an effort; but as if saying something that had been in his mind some time, only waiting a fitting opportunity of speech. "It is not too late to try and lead new lives. Then we should have nothing to reproach ourselves with—nothing fresh, that is to say."

"Hugh! . . . What—what do you mean? *You don't*—— Are you accusing me of being a bad woman?"

Stella's bosom was heaving wildly. She pressed her two hands on it to keep under the tumultuous panting of her heart, while her eyes gazed at Middlesex with a sort of horrified surprise. Unconsciously she had started to her feet, while stammering with choking voice the only words she could command.

Lord Middlesex was silent.

Swaying over, Stella fell prostrate on the sofa, as if fainting. Yet she could not faint, bitter though her sudden misery was. She could only draw long sighing breaths, and stir her head weakly on a cushion.

It would have been an intense relief to the suffering woman's overwrought nerves to give way to the gulping sensation of hysteria; to sob and laugh wildly and grip the cushions hard with both hands. Būt Stella fought down the lump rising in her throat, choking her breath, caused by an awful feeling that the only man she had ever loved was showing signs for the first time of breaking away from their mutual affection. Tears would disgust him; a red swollen face and bloodshot eyes! Faugh! She dared not be natural.

Middlesex had sprung up, too, in some alarm, as Stella fell.

Now he bent over her, startled, annoyed, yet on the whole pitying. Evidently she had misunderstood his meaning, poor little woman! He was sorry for that, heartily sorry, too, that the real explanation was not yet over. Now he

sat down beside her, with caressing voice and touch.

“I never meant what you suppose, dear. How could you think so?”

The woman who loved him prevented herself, with a shiver of dread, from asking, “What did you mean?” On the contrary, with trembling accents, she began excusing herself from the very accusation which he disclaimed to have made.

“If I thought it really wrong—— But what I do think wicked was my family marrying me so young to a grey-haired, middle-aged, stiff lawyer like John. They ought to have stopped me. They knew—how could I?—what was sure to happen. I scoffed at love as moonshine. I was as cold hearted and ambitious as many a girl is at seventeen. You men imagine all young girls as ready to fall in love, and romantic. There is your mistake. They are often as hard as—as green apples. And those very girls will be, later on, the ones who are most susceptible and passionate, only at first they don’t understand love, not for some years, perhaps, till the right man comes. All they see is, just what common sense told me, that

to enjoy themselves girls must get married, and have a house of their own, and a carriage, if possible—in fact, all the good things of riches, if they can.”

“That is not giving a very high view of the motives that led you to marry. Come, dear, after all, you thought you could respect your husband, and so far, I have little doubt, you were right.”

“Hugh, I am always truthful; even too frank sometimes, as you say. And I repeat that it is a crime to allow a young girl like me to marry a man she doesn’t and cannot care about. It is hideous! She has not even a notion what solemn vows she is making. That is her only excuse. Where is the moral difference, I ask you, between her and the person she has probably displaced? She is virtually offered a home for life, and settlements; food and clothes, etc., in return for herself, body and mind. (For one must give one’s mind to the dinners and house-books in our station of life, worse luck!) The one is a short, the other a long engagement. That’s all.”

“Stella ! Stella ! Remember that to a man’s mind the sacredness of legal ties ; the—the feeling of family union—I can’t go on ! Why do you raise such burning questions between us, dear, which are impossible to discuss without pain ?”

“Because—oh, forgive me, Hughie !” she threw herself on his breast, weeping now a little in spite of strong efforts not to do so, and therefore hiding her face—“because I want you to feel with me that our affection is more sacred by far than these mere legal bonds. Surely, surely, a mutual great love, that comes without our being able to prevent it, cannot be wrong. If even I had loved John first, then change might be a sin. But I never did, and a woman must love—at least, once ! Heaven made us human beings so. Heaven must have seen I could never, never, care for a man nearly as old as my father ; who had loved, or thought he did, a dozen or more women before I was out of the nursery. Then Heaven—supposing it consecrated this marriage—condemned me, an innocent, ignorant young creature, either to sin or sorrow. *Don’t you see that ?*”

“I see that with your ardent nature your marriage was, perhaps, a mistake,” answered the man in a constrained voice. (He was of the other sex; how could he quite agree? Had not he, too, had “a dozen” other loves, before his eyes lighted on pretty young Mrs. Morice? And did he not look forward at this very moment to——) “But still, it seems a pity you could not have reconciled yourself a little more at first to your lot. Your married life might have been more free from jars and discord. Plenty of other women, let me assure you, I know, are as ill-matched as yourself, but they smile outwardly on their husbands, and so quarrels are avoided.”

“I can’t—I cannot! Why, a very short time after we were married some old friends of Mr. Morice came to this house. They were men of his own age; grey-haired or bald. And one day when they were in his study (he was out of the room) and I was passing by, I heard them joking together over his marrying a young girl at his age. ‘Well done,’ one of them said, with a detestable chuckle. ‘I knew an old fellow who married

a pretty girl when he was eighty-one, jolly old chap! I shouldn't mind doing the same myself.' Ugh!"—with a long-drawn shudder of disgust—"such marriages should be forbidden by law. Don't tell me that what is unnatural can be right? Their banter tore the scales from my eyes. And there I saw myself—young, unhappy, and solitary—till I met you. Oh, Hughie . . . Hughie . . . Hughie!"

Middlesex contracted his brows; the reiterated pet name jarred upon him painfully, recalling how differently, how shyly, it had been whispered in his ear—only last week. But he tried to soothe the weeping woman, and was tender, affectionate. He would have held himself a brute otherwise, after all that had been between them. The past two years, charged with memories of an exciting, slightly dangerous, and on the whole delightful acquaintance with each other, could not be lightly forgotten by him.

Please goodness! this sort of thing must never happen again. He had sown his last handful of wild oats.

But he was sorry for Stella—heartily sorry.

CHAPTER II.

“What makes thee struggle and rave?

Why are men ill at ease?

’Tis that the lot they have,

Fails their own will to please;

For man would make no murmuring were his will obey’d.”

For some time Stella remained quiet, still feeling faint, her head resting against the shoulder of the man she loved, not only passionately but with all the inexperience, the blind belief and worship of a first attachment. Her lover had actually no fault in her eyes; he was as a god.

To soothe her, Middlesex had begun stroking her soft, luxuriant hair; and Stella felt mesmerised by the touch of his fingers, happiness stealing slowly once more through her veins. She could not see that above her head he looked twice at the clock on the mantel-piece; nor that a bored expression was settling on his handsome features.

At last a heavy sigh escaped the guest. Stella felt the heaving of his chest, and, thrilled with the thought that she had the power to cause this supposed emotion, raised her head slowly, with a deep rapturous smile. Even afterwards—long afterwards, when the pitilessly clear light of experience that illumines our past, might have made the matter plain to her—she never guessed that the man's sigh was for himself and his future, across which she threw her shadow: that he was thinking with secret impatience, "Does she suppose this can go on for ever?"

"Come, that is right! I am glad to see you smiling again, like my bright evening star, before I go away," he said aloud.

"You are not leaving me so soon?"

"Why, I have been here nearly an hour and a half. Besides, your devoted admirer, young Muir, generally comes about this time, and will most likely consider me rather in the way."

"That boy! I am sick of him," pouted Mrs. Morice, with a pretty air of indifference.

"Don't be unkind. Think how *useful* he

has been," softly chid Middlesex, with a meaning smile, as he rose.

Stella could not help smiling likewise, though she blushed slightly.

"Then we shall meet to-morrow night? You can come to my mother's ball, you think, in spite of Mr. Morice's—er—disapproval?"

Middlesex hesitated as he asked the question.

But for the recent agitation that had left her confused, and that she was anxiously trying to steal a glance in the nearest mirror, from fearful love rather than vanity, Stella must have noticed that her admirer spoke as if there was some trouble on his mind. Instead of which suspicious insight, quick loving assurances rushed to her lips.

"Of course I shall go. What! miss seeing you for the first time in your own house; and when your mother was so good as to ask me? Oh, I know you must have managed that; but I am grateful all the same. Besides, how could I disappoint you, after your bringing me to-day such a beautiful, beautiful keepsake? I shall always treasure it."

She glanced down joyously at an opal brooch

surrounded by brilliants, that flashed brightly from some black lace on the front of her gown, where she had fastened it low, so that her eyes might now and then gloat on the cherished token.

Middlesex was clearing his throat, preparatory to a supreme effort. (*"Because I have something to tell you first."* The words were on his tongue, repeated over silently, to give himself courage.)

"I am so happy now! I don't know how I could make myself so utterly miserable a little while ago," added Stella, radiantly, though her lips quivered slightly still, the last signs of the late storm of suppressed emotion that was dying away.

The clock struck five.

"Too late. I dare not risk breaking her the news to-day," Middlesex quickly decided.

"Good-bye, Stella dear. Perhaps I shall write you a letter to-morrow. Here is your maid coming with tea. I can hear a rattle of china in the passage." He pressed her hand in leavetaking, kindly, but tranquilly.

The maid, who entered just then, glanced

demurely at his lordship, whose visits were like Jove's descents from Olympus to the household ; but she saw nothing different from other gentlemen in the great man's manner.

Then, smiling faintly with a lingering regret at taking his leave, for which Stella's heart gave him a mute million thanks, Lord Middlesex moved very slowly out of the room, fading, so to speak, from his hostess's vision.

He was gone. Left alone, the woman he had quitted sank back on her cushions as if all strength likewise had left her. The light of her eyes was taken away. Awhile Stella seemed in a kind of trance. Her body felt utterly inert, while her real self, her soul, was out in the street with the man she loved—driving in his hansom—passing away with him into his other life beyond her ken.

So she sat there drooping, sunk in reverie, staring at the door through which Middlesex had departed. At last, after full ten minutes, Stella roused herself, then covered her face with her long white hands, and began rocking her body to and fro.

“Oh, my love, my own love !” she mutely

murmured. "I love every hair of your dear head. I would die for you—I would make myself as the very dust under your feet at your bidding. What will come of all this? No matter! The least thought of losing you is far more bitter than death! What was wrong to-day? The first time he has ever hinted at our giving each other up. He could not mean anything—*he could not!* Surely it was my own imagination; and it was stupid of me to talk to him as I did. O God!—if there is a God—if only this one precious gift is left to me, I will try to be so good in other ways. And I will bring up Rose and baby so carefully, and take care they only marry men they love. They shall never know my great temptation. Never! I swear solemnly to do my best to keep them pure and good."

Was Stella trying to make a bargain with that great Spirit unto whom, she had been taught, all hearts are open, and from whom no secrets are hid—who has declared Himself to be perfect Holiness as well as perfect Love?

"It is all my parents' fault for being so anxious to be rid of the burden of me," she

lamented for the thousandth time to herself. "The sins of the fathers are visited on the children, indeed, when the children bear the punishment that ought to fall rightly on the elders. I could never act so by my little ones."

A pang darted through the speaker's heart. Just so a lightning flash in a dark and stormy night may reveal to a traveller, resolved to try and grope forward, some frightful chasm ahead at which he had not guessed.

"No, no," Mrs. Morice cried out, answering her own reproachful thought. "It cannot be—I *am not* sinning against my babies in this! My father and mother broke the natural law in forcing this old man upon me as a husband, who became repugnant to me. And now they would blame me for breaking the spiritual law by loving Hughie? No, no; surely God's laws and those of nature are one and the same! *Who knows?*"

Yet she bit her lip till it bled; then reproached her own foolishness, remembering that Middlesex might notice the tiny scar.

Like hundreds, thousands of others, this woman was dissatisfied. For what was her

life? A few brief snatches of passionate joy. Long stretches between whiles of days passed in watching and waiting, nights of sleepless repining and trouble of conscience.

“Surely,” Stella Morice argued indignantly within herself, “each human creature born has a right to some happiness in existence. Were we created in order to suffer?”

In answer to this, she remembered that her friend, Mary Dawson, held the vague belief that we all are dowered with a birthright of pain, which may in the fulness of time prove a blessing. According to this hope rather than theory, sorrow is a sacred mystery pervading all creation, which makes the pangs and deaths of many hundred creatures of the animal world necessary to sustain the life of a mere human unit; whilst we should rejoice in the toils, battlings, and martyrdom of our forefathers through long ages, that have gained for us at last so much as we possess of civilization and freedom. Deity's self, in this creed, had taken in sign of the supreme glory of suffering for others the name of the Man of Sorrows.

Meanwhile, darkness had now fallen outside

in the streets. Beside the square railings opposite a man's figure was standing still, and looking up at the lighted windows of the house. The face that gazed so intently was young and very handsome ; its owner could not be older than two and twenty.

CHAPTER III.

“Ein jüdling liebt ein mädchen,
Die hat einen Andern gewählt :
Der Andre liebt eine Andre,
Und hat sich mit dieser vermählt.

.

“Es ist eine alte geschichte,
Doch bleibt sie immer neu :
Und wem sie just passieret,
Dem bricht das Herz entzwei.”

“WHY does Gordon Muir not come, I wonder ?”
it presently struck Mrs. Morice to ask herself.

As if in unconscious obedience to her slightest wish, the watcher outside in the square moved with slow steps to the house door and rang. Three minutes later the maid ushered him into Stella's presence, announcing, “Mr. Muir.”

The young man came forward with such a frank glow of joy in his dark eyes as in a few years he would rather endeavour to hide. Yet he took the hand of his hostess with a deference

that might have been offered to royalty. It was the honest homage of a young heart. He felt himself Stella's sworn knight. She was the "ladye most fayre" whom he worshipped from afar with all the chivalry of an ardent nature.

Mrs. Morice, with a dreamy smile, motioned this new guest to a chair. He would have taken the seat Lord Middlesex had so lately occupied, but that Stella, with apparently whimsical imperiousness, made a forbidding gesture.

"May I not come a little nearer the tea-table?" asked the lad humbly, his beautiful eyes lighting up with the wish he dared not utter, to approach, if ever so slightly, nearer his hostess. Then, in quick compunction, "Why, you have not had any tea yet, I see. Have I kept you waiting? I am so sorry, but I forgot myself——"

The new-comer stopped, confused. Impossible to say that he had been lost in a dream, outside there in the square, gazing at his divinity's windows.

"I forgot to make the tea," said Stella, with an absent look; "and, dear me, the spirit-

lamp is burnt out. No matter; I will ring for hot water. No tea for you? Oh, nonsense. A little more trouble will not hurt the maids. Besides, I want to send for the children at the same time."

"Am I not allowed, then, to have even five minutes of your company all to myself?" put in young Gordon, with a hurt smile.

"What! You would not have me an unnatural mother, and deprive my babies of their play-hour here, even for your sake? Oh, you selfish boy!" Mrs. Morice laughingly scolded in reply.

So the maid brought fresh tea, grumbling in her heart, "I have been up those stairs a dozen times. Some people are so selfish, they never think of others." And two charming baby-girls were ushered into the drawing-room by their nurse.

The eldest child was a pretty dumpling of five, with fair hair and grey eyes that showed she took after the Morice side of the family. But the youngest, of only a year old, looked out at the strange world with limpid eyes even bigger and bluer than Stella's own.

Mrs. Morice took this little one on her knee, and while Rose, the elder infant, plumped down contentedly on the carpet to play with some silver Dutch toys that her mother gave her from a tiny table near, heaped with similar knickknacks, the baby stretched out both arms towards a gold smelling-bottle. Stella at once gave her darling the plaything, while Gordon Muir looked on at the scene with an aggrieved feeling swelling almost to a sense of injury in his heart.

The most striking feature in young Muir's face were his piercing eyes, surmounted by arched, strongly marked, dark eyebrows that when he was vexed almost met, but for one deep furrow of anger, more often seen in men of maturer years. His nose was finely shaped, with a peculiar droop at its tip, that gave an impression of sensitiveness to a close observer; this was also borne out by the mouth, that, under a budding, dark, silky moustache, was as exquisitely shaped as that of a beautiful woman. It would have been a gentle face but for the aforesaid eyes and the chin, which showed a firmness of character that might harden with

time into a harsher quality. The contour of Muir's head was remarkably good—rather small, yet noble in outline. Many women would love this youth in future years, one might guess, judging merely by that singularly handsome face. But he himself! Would this young runner, just beginning his manhood's race, be a winner or not? Stella, who knew him well, secretly doubted his future success.

“He has not got luck written in his looks. And he is so intensely romantic, high-strung, and impressionable to the last degree,” she remarked one day to Middlesex.

“So much the worse for himself,” said the latter, carelessly. “Lucky men have rhinoceros hides for their skins. Still, young Muir is not altogether soft, I imagine. There was a portrait in the Old Masters' Exhibition last winter of which he strongly reminds me. It was of a young Italian noble, name unknown. He looked crossed in love, poor chap, and as if he meant to take his revenge on your sex without much quarter. Quite a remarkable resemblance.”

“Gordon Muir could never be harsh to

women. He is a poet in heart; a dreamer of beautiful dreams."

"So was Byron; so was Shelley," yawned milord, who took small interest in the subject under discussion, but was able in argument when he chose, and not averse to displaying his powers.

At the present moment Muir was still frowning at the gurgling baby. It was sucking the top of the smelling-bottle now, the present he had given her—Stella. Her initials in diamonds on the pretty plaything had cost him what made a severe gap in his subaltern's income. At the time this last consideration was a real pleasure; it seemed a luxury to practise self-denial for Stella's sake. He had fondly imagined that his lady would, as she had assured him at the time, "treasure his gift." And now, behold its destiny! Bah! It was disgusting.

"What are you meditating upon?" asked Mrs. Morice, rousing. Her infants had almost engrossed her attention until this moment. "Is not Pansy like me? Yes, baby, you are all my own. But Rosebud there, though a dear mite, is quite a Morice."

"I was wondering how one ought to talk to children," was the untruthful reply. "Do tell me how to begin. I feel quite shy."

"How silly! Shy with my daughters? Why, even Lord Middlesex made them laugh the other day, when he met them; and I do not often display my jewels to him."

"I cannot venture to compete with any person so favoured by fortune as the Earl of Middlesex."

What a flash of the lad's glowing eyes; what proud humility of tone!

"Oh, you stubborn Scotchman. You never could endure poor Lord Middlesex, and yet he speaks so differently of you. He says he likes what he has seen of you *immensely*."

"I am obliged for the compliment. I only wish I could truthfully return it. But I—cannot."

"Gordon! Why do you speak so unkindly? After all, is he not *very useful*?"

Stella said this out of pure mischief. But at her softly insinuating answer, accompanied by a coquettish blue glance, that older and wiser heads than his might have found irresistible,

it was so sweetly witching, a flush of happiness leaped warmly to young Muir's face. His eyes answered hers with quick ecstasy, passionate devotion, at the implied hint that his rival was but a titled dummy—a blind to keep the world from noticing that he himself was preferred, was—was, after all, something dearer than her pet lap-dog, more than a mere slave to every feminine whim.

Yes, Gordon Muir believed his lady peerless, flawless, whiter than the down of the swan, sweeter than the bag o' the bee. But—such is the reasoning of the mind of boy or man where woman is concerned—surely Stella's loyalty towards the middle-aged, unsympathetic husband to whom she was yoked, devotion to the tyrant's babes, need not morally hinder her from returning his own deep though utterly hopeless attachment. Oh, in all honour! in unsullied purity! Surely they two were meant for each other by spiritual affinity, though cruel fate had caused them to meet for the first time in life—too late!

How often had not Stella told Gordon Muir, in gratitude for some little proof of his devotion,

that she did not know how she could sometimes endure her lot but for his friendship? Yes, he was her friend. In his heart the lad vowed to remain so through all his life, ay, even to death.

At his glowing look Mrs. Morice was moved to bethink herself how these last few months the poor boy had so tried to do even the impossible to give her pleasure, that he really deserved some slight reward.

She put the baby down on the floor to crawl beside its sister, and came over to seat herself near her humble servitor with a sympathetic manner. Her voice stole sweetly into his ears, and thence to his heart, bringing music and fragrance at the same time.

“Now, my friend, tell me something of yourself, of your gaieties at Aldershot. And, what is more important, when does the regiment go to India?”

“In six weeks.”

Young Muir was looking with a long deep gaze in the face of his guardian angel, to him the living beautiful incarnation of all womanhood's virtues. How divinely good, how sisterly,

motherly sweet was she. He would have held himself foully traitorous in thought to picture his lady as moved, even for his sake, to swerve one inch from the path of rectitude her dear feet trod so lightly and cheerfully.

“What! so soon?”—in genuine regret, if not in poignant sorrow. “I shall miss you, my dear boy, *dreadfully*.”

“I am not going.”

Gordon’s voice had a curious choke in its sound.

“Not going? Why? What do you mean?”

“I have exchanged to-day. I have left the old regiment, and gone into the —th, the Mudshire regiment.”

“*Left!*”—Stella started in real dismay, and stared at him with pity and almost anger born of self-accusation. “What! left your father’s regiment — your grandfather’s? But what will they say? They will be furious, and—why, good heavens! you were to have been your father’s aide-de-camp when you went out. General Muir will never forgive you.”

“I cannot help that.”

Gordon was pressing his lips together tightly.

Stella put out her hand and softly laid it on his arm.

“But why have you done this? I do not understand.”

“I did it for your sake. Have you not told me that, but for what little friendship and help I can give you, your existence would be too lonely for you to bear?”

“Are you mad, Gordon? I—I am so amazed that I can hardly speak. Do you know that your whole career, your whole life, may be spoilt by this quixotic idea?”

“I know this, that my life is of no value in my eyes, except in so far as it may be of some use to *you*.”

The last word was whispered with fervent adoration. Then, alarmed at his newborn boldness, young Muir sprang to his feet, his eyes still looking—looking at Stella’s face with most apologetic, humblest homage.

“But to join the Mudlarks! To give up all your hopes of frontier-fighting, and be stuck in what is one of the worst regiments—so you yourself told me—in the service! Dear boy, it is not yet too late. Go back, I implore you, and set it all right.”

“It is too late. I would not tell you till it was irrevocably settled.”

As he spoke, the lad's face was irradiated with proud joyousness in his great sacrifice. Could the bravest, truest knight of old have done more? He was laying, indeed, his whole life down at his lady's feet.

“Good-bye. I must be going, indeed. My colonel—my new colonel—has told me to call upon him at the Junior United, and I must not keep him waiting. Forgive me for running away.”

Stooping his head, Gordon gallantly pressed his lips to the limp hand Stella mechanically extended in her dismay, the while he registered a vow of lifelong loyalty in his heart. It was the first time he had ever dared even to kiss her hand! He was trembling at his own presumption, yet surely his great sacrifice deserved this reward. Then, afraid to trust himself longer, the new Mudshire subaltern hurriedly left the room.

Stella twisted her handkerchief tightly round her fingers in hot compunction, shame, and real dismay, when he was gone. Soon she

sprang to her feet and walked up and down the room once or twice. Two big tears rolled down her cheeks, but she wiped away angrily the wet signs of grief.

“Poor boy, poor innocent boy ! what terrible harm I have done him ! Still who could have ever dreamed he would be such an idiot ? *I am sorry !* I am sorry from the depths of my heart ! But there ! he is too good to live. I can’t keep up being thought such a seraph. After all, what good does being sorry do in this world ? It won’t mend what’s done, and can’t be undone.”

The baby, creeping sideways on the carpet, hit its tiny hand against a chair-leg and, after stopping to meditate, raised a piping howl of protest. Its mother caught the little one up, and covered the soft waxen fingers with passionate kisses. The other child came pouting to her knee, jealous of the attention shown to its sister ; and Stella caressed Rose also with loving tenderness, if less rapturously.

She was a doting mother to both infants, but the youngest-born was her idol.

CHAPTER IV.

“ . . . at that he drew
The sluice of silence, and his life rushed forth——
Its grief, despair, anguish and clinging hope.”

“ Hope’s door closed with a clang.”

“CAN I believe my own ears? Do you mean to say that you wish to go to a party at Lord Middlesex’s house this night?”

The speaker was John Morice, Stella’s middle-aged husband. They two were dining alone together; and over the dessert Morice looked with a sidelong glance at his wife, bending so that the lamp’s rays fell full on his bald forehead and iron-grey hair.

Mr. Morice had fairly good features, but these were set in so long and thin a face that they seemed too far apart to be on speaking terms with each other, as Stella used to think scoffingly within herself. His eyes had now a darkly earnest stare, though in themselves

mere cold grey orbs, somewhat bloodshot at the corners. His mouth, long-drawn and well-curved—a crossbow, as she privately called it—twitched ominously, if slightly. As the well-known Queen’s counsel was clean shaven, this motion of his lips was plainly discernible. Stella read the storm-signals clearly, but answered, still undaunted—

“I said, I am going to a crush given by old Lady Middlesex to-night. I refused for you, as you never like hot rooms and a crowd; but I asked young Mr. Muir if his aunt will be there, and he said, ‘Yes,’ and will call——”

“You are *not going*, madam! Do you hear?” and John Morice struck the palm of his hand on the table.

“And why not, pray?” Stella controlled her rising wrath, and tried to speak quietly. “What earthly reason can you have for preventing me from visiting one of the best houses in London? All the great world will be there. I shall enjoy seeing everybody immensely, even if I know few people; and such invitations do not exactly come to our house as plentifully as blackberries grow on the hedges.”

“What reason, do you ask? Well, for one—only one to begin with. If you will be good enough to look at the dress you have on, trimmed with crape in memory of my poor mother, who is not many months dead, perhaps common decency will suggest a reason,” in icily sarcastic tones.

“Your mother never liked me, do what I would to try and please her. It seems a mockery to pretend to mourn a person deeply for whom one had no real affection. Still, I have shown respect, as to your mother; but, good heavens! you talk of months of seclusion as a trifle. Months!”

“A year would not be too much in my opinion. Whether you grieved or not, so long as you bear my name, you must also accept your responsibilities in my family, as is fitting.”

“But you yourself, John! You went to a City banquet the other day, and you were her own son.”

“That is a totally different matter, as I happen to be a man. The women of a family are expected to show that regard for the outward proprieties which is one of the safeguards

of our morality as a nation. Men lead necessarily busier and more active lives. We have less time for such domestic duties."

The tone in which John Morice thus laid down the law was so maddeningly slow and solemn, while he beat a long bony finger harshly on the table in accompaniment to every two or three words, that Stella, goaded to imprudence, flung back in answer—

"Would you please mind not rapping like that? it jars on my nerves. And, as to men's lives, you have hit the truth exactly. They are fuller, wider, and more interesting than our dull waste of days. Yes, certainly, you men have harder work, but you keep the lion's share of this world's good things to yourselves. Do girls ever spend from their cradles till womanhood on dress (their sole extravagance) a tithe of all that their brothers are laughed at for wasting in college days on horses, betting, cards, wine-parties, cigars? Then, when men are older, they enjoy themselves at clubs, dinners, and—and in other ways. What have we got to amuse us equally, or to occupy our minds?"

"Well-principled, well-conducted women take

sufficient interest and pleasure, I have always heard, in their households, their children, and also in the companionship of their husbands."

"Their households!" Stella tossed her scornful head. "So you can pretend that there is pleasure in the petty, nagging worries of house-keeping and servants' quarrels and comings and goings; in what women sigh over to each other, unless they have the souls of cooks in their bodies. Why, they hail a country visit, a trip abroad just to be rid of the household books and the everlasting, 'Please, m'm, may I speak a word? I wish to know whose place it is in this house to——' Oh, to do goodness knows what! House-keeping, indeed! Just a grind that men would never bear—that often drives them to marry in order to be rid of even the bother of ordering dinner in lodgings. Yes, we know some one has to do it—and that, naturally, as men won't, women *must*! But to say that there is pleasure, interest, in weighing out stores and checking butchers' bills for an educated human being with intellect, compared with the excitement of a three hours' eager debate on some great political question; with navigating a ship

in a storm ; leading a regiment ; or—no, don't interrupt me—with even gambling on the Stock Exchange ; finishing some wonderful engineering triumph ; or making a fine speech and winning your case, as *you* do sometimes. Why, there you men can see a result, an outcome of your years of toil. And we never do ! You see what I mean ? ”

The last words came rather feebly. Stella hoped to touch her husband by that flattering allusion to his success as a lawyer, but a sardonic expression only deepened on his brow. He saw through her woman's wile. Little she cared for his cases, he knew ; and she knew it too.

“ I see, you are growing dramatic over your fancied wrongs. You women have an easy time of it, I can tell you, compared with us. But perhaps you would like to become a female lecturer on women's rights, and stump the country, leaving me to nurse your babies.”

Mrs. Morice was silent a moment, wounded. Then she retorted with bitterness—

“ I unburthen my mind once with you in private, and am accused instantly of wishing to make a public show of myself. Is that a man's

vaunted fairness? As to the children, have I ever shown the faintest wish to hand over the care of them to any other person? Can you complain of the least sign of weariness in me, while nursing them when sick for nights and nights?"

"No, I grant that."

"Yes; you grant that much," went on Stella, with rising heat. "We women bear children with care and sorrow, as did Eve; we have in every way more to endure of bodily weaknesses and ailments than men. Besides that, we have the hourly household work, fretting us the more that there is no relaxation from morning till bedtime, though its trials are so small and mean. And as constantly there is anxiety for the children, through all the illnesses they are sure to have. Putting them aside, if there is sickness or death in the family, whether of parents, or brothers, or sisters, who has the long nights and days of nursing and sitting up, till one is ready to drop with exhaustion? Not the strong men of the family. Your sister has never recovered the strain on her constitution from your father's

long illness, when he would not allow her the help of a hospital nurse. And then, when your mother——”

“That will do! What are you driving at, when all this is said?” broke in Morice, impatiently.

It was true about poor Marian. She had had a hard time of it, with the tyrannical old man. Many women do suffer such trials. But, though he was somewhat sorry for his sister, how could the brother help what it had been her lot to bear?

“I mean,” said Stella, sullenly, “that if we have the worst of it all round, we ought not to be grudged what few pleasures we can enjoy. And, therefore, I do not think it right or reasonable for you to make any objection to my going to this ball to-night?”

“A-h! So it is a ball?”

John Morice drew in his breath with a prolonged hissing sound. He rested his elbow on the table and began biting his finger-nail mechanically, supporting his cheek on his hand, while staring hard again with his previous darkly oblique look at his wife.

“Not right or reasonable,” he repeated in an impressive whisper.

Stella felt half alarmed; perhaps most by that unconscious trick of gnawing his nails, of which she had never before seen her scrupulously well-behaved husband guilty. It was as if the prim, correct Queen’s counsel was lapsing into savagery. If he were next to flourish a knife in the air, she would only feel a trifle more surprised.

Then it struck the wife, with a curious new keenness of perception, that John’s skin was really pale yellow. Could he be taking jaundice? She had never noticed before that all round his eyes there was a network of fine wrinkles lately puckered.

“*Not right or reasonable!*” hissed the resentful man once more, and now his eyes veritably glared across the length of the snowy tablecloth, as if they were two burning glasses directed straight at his wife’s face.

The latter’s heart sank; still she set her teeth, and, though her cheeks blanched, not a muscle but was rigid.

“Ha! you have the devil’s own pluck, but

conscience makes you a coward all the same," burst out Morice, infuriated by Stella's unyielding aspect. "Do you dare to sit there and deny that you are going only to see Lord Middlesex; to be in his society, and listen to his sugared flatteries, that turn your foolish head and keep you from doing your duty by your husband?"

"I dare to say that Lord Middlesex is my best friend, and that I am going just because he, of course, asked for this invitation to be sent me. As to not doing my duty by you, of what neglect in that respect do you accuse me?"

As she spoke the last sentence, Mrs. Morice's short upper lip twitched. She was no liar, at least; and she hated even this necessary evasion of her opponent's home-thrust.

"What? . . Ha! what?"

John Morice's eyes glared. With a violent movement of his arm he upset some wine-glasses and rumbled the cloth in a disorderly way.

"I accuse you of carrying on a disgraceful flirtation, if you want to know; of making

your husband a laughing-stock, while you, madam, are the common topic of scandal and gossip amongst all our acquaintances. I am ashamed to call you my wife. If you have no self-respect left for your own good name, at least you might think before blighting the future of your innocent children. Stay——”

But Stella had sprung to her feet.

“I will *not* stay to be insulted any longer. When you wanted to marry, why could you not have chosen some woman of your own age? Some one who had lived her youth through and enjoyed it, instead of chaining a girl to your side, and then railing at her because she has the natural feelings of her years and is not old and staid like yourself?” Bursting into a passion of tears, she hurried from the room.

Left alone, John Morice sat still, breathing hard. He was staring at the door through which his wife had vanished, a vision of beauty in anger and distress. Her answer had sent a quivering shock all through the man. At last he gave a groaning sigh and buried his face in his hands, with his elbows on the table, thinking.

“After all,” was the thought that rose uppermost in his mind, “she had some right there—some right—some.”

Although Morice felt blistered with pain, as from a hundred stings, trifles light as air but powerful to wound as gnats—innuendoes, friends’ warnings, and anonymous letters—yet he tried to be fair above all things, as was his nature. Then once again an overwhelming wave of misery swept over his head and blotted out all other considerations under its tide. He was growing old, although Stella need not have flung that in his teeth; and after a long and honourable public life it was hard to end his days in private bitterness, to live in dread of his fair name being smirched with mud by his wife, at best to drag out existence in secret solitariness with an unsmiling yoke-fellow.

Jealousy, once brewed in his heart, seemed to have filtered through his very soul, soaked into the marrow of his bones, till body and mind were alike sick to death. Truly, as said the wise man, this evil is more cruel than the grave.

Morice pressed his hand against his side.

“If she had only been patient with me these few years, poor girl! for she might be set free sooner than she thinks,” he said aloud. “Yet, no; perhaps this heart disease would never have shown itself but for my anguish of mind. Still, I am dying slowly. If she knew, she might show me pity, even feel sorrow. She is a woman, and pain always appeals to women’s feelings. It might make her pause, and then—— What then? A man has no right to trouble himself about what others may do after his death; naked he came, naked he goes; and as he can take nought away with him, so he has no right to make undue claims upon the memories of those he leaves behind him. Yes, as Stella said, perhaps it was selfish of me marrying her.”

Morice had not thought so at the time; still, granting that, his mistake then did not justify her headstrong ways or flightiness now, although he owned it was some condonation. Poor girl, poor girl! The worst of it was—so he told himself—the worst was that he still loved her. She was weeping in her own room, no doubt. Well, he would go and seek a

reconciliation ; tell her what his doctor had said lately ; speak kindly.

After all, Stella was not without tenderness in her heart, she dearly loved her children, and if only out of pure pity she might consent to patch up a truce, even to be gentle and affectionate towards him, during the little time he had to live. For, however appearances were against her, Morice would not believe that his wife had acted worse than foolishly as yet.

Full of this softening resolution, Morice rose and was crossing the hall outside, meaning to go upstairs to Stella's room, when the postman's double knock sounded at the door, and two letters fell into the letter-box. Only that he was close by, Mr. Morice would have left these for the butler to bring, as usual. As it was, he took them out, hardly knowing why he did so, glanced at the address of a blue envelope, presumably a bill for his wife ; then, with a start, he recognized a coronet upon the other letter, and his hand closed tightly upon it.

A maid came running down the stairs with quick, light footfall, hesitated on seeing her master, then came rather pertly forward.

“Please, sir, I was sent to see if there were any letters for Mrs. Morice?”

Grimly John Morice handed her the blue envelope in silence, while his fingers clutched the other one convulsively. Two minutes later and he had turned up his study lamp, cut that letter open carefully above the seal, and was devouring its contents with gleaming eyes.

It was a letter of contrition, of apology; hinting at a changed existence beginning for the writer, at duties, hitherto neglected, that must now be taken up, reiterated expressions of pain at causing Stella possibly some sorrow for a while (the writer trusted a very short while).

Over these three pages the eyes of the man who read them verily gloated. But as he turned to the fourth one, a cry, like that of an animal, escaped from his lips. Morice clenched his fist, while rage convulsed him like a possessing evil demon, as with staring eyeballs he read some ending words fraught with hidden meaning that he, alas, had the clue to decipher.

It was true, then! the worst he had refused to believe—it must be true!

A sharp pain shot through his heart, so that he was forced to drop back in his chair and lie still for some minutes till its agony passed, then with trembling hands he wiped his pale brow.

Through the silence of the house at that moment light footsteps could be heard crossing the hall outside, the front door softly opened, and shut again. Next followed the sound of a hansom's doors closing—the jingle of bells and muffled roll of wheels with indiarubber tires.

Morice suddenly roused himself from stupor and rushed out into the hall. Stella's maid was just slipping up the stairs.

“Who went out this minute?” he demanded hoarsely.

“It was my mistress, sir; she has gone to the ball at Lady Middlesex's. She desired me to say, if you asked, that she hoped you would not disturb yourself on her account. I am to sit up to let her in.”

Tossing her head somewhat insolently, the girl turned, and was going upstairs, when her master harshly called out—

“Stop! Do you hear my orders now? You are to go to bed, and I will let your mistress in. To-morrow you can leave this house. I will pay your month’s wages in advance.”

The girl attempted some whimpering, frightened protests, but the look on the lawyer’s face intensified the latter feeling. With a burst of tears she vanished hastily out of his sight.

CHAPTER V.

“For the heart
Made firewood for his sake, and flaming up
To his very face . . . he warmed his feet at it.”

ON leaving the dining-room Stella had, truly enough, as her husband guessed, given way to a burst of tempestuous feeling, but all the time she never once wavered from her intention of going to Lady Middlesex's ball. Ringing for her maid, after a few minutes of weeping, she was dressed quickly, but even more carefully than usual, in all the articles of finery that lay outspread upon the bed; while some rouge and powder replaced what ravages the late storm of anger had left upon her face.

At last this hurried toilet was finished, and Mrs. Morice contemplated her figure in a large mirror with a returning smile of satisfaction. Stella had put on a lovely gown of yellow crêpe; it had been bought just before

her mother-in-law's death, and never worn. With some diamonds in her hair and on her breast, and carrying a large ostrich-feather fan, she looked indeed, as Middlesex had said so lately, "a very pretty woman."

Mrs. Morice's maid was devoted to her mistress, or at least pretended so to be. Putting her head out of the window carefully, she now reconnoitred the street below.

"It is all right, ma'am; the hansom is waiting just at the square railings."

Unlocking the bedroom door, both stole softly downstairs and into the hall—as narrated.

Outside, Muir had been shivering for half an hour in a hansom, according to orders.

"Why all this mystery?" he asked, puzzled yet obedient, as at last the hooded figure he waited for signalled from the threshold of the Morices' house.

"I will tell you afterwards," Stella murmured as they drove away. "John is tiresome to-night; he might have stopped me had he known you were waiting."

The lad sighed, pitying her with all his honest heart; but he was satisfied.

The great hall at Middlesex House was like a tropical scene, with its splendid show of palms and tree ferns, that night. Stella, who had never been before at a ball in one of the great London houses of our aristocracy, felt slightly bewildered, yet in fairyland. There was a more than usual crush on the grand staircase of beautiful, well-dressed women, of men whom she knew by sight as the cream of fashion, having had them pointed out to her at Sandown and in the Park.

For a few moments Mrs. Morice felt herself small and of no account; but then a glow of secret triumph warmed her heart so that she raised her head and her eyes brightened.

“All the same, Middlesex cares for me more than for all those others. He will be watching and waiting upstairs for *me*.”

At last they reached the first of a long suite of reception rooms, where Lord Middlesex was smiling and shaking hands with most of the advancing stream of guests as he stood not far from his mother, who was receiving for him. The latter was old, aristocratic, keen-eyed, and covered with diamonds.

As Stella came in, looking shy yet radiant, the host met her with a quick whisper.

“You are a little late, but I am very glad you have come—*very glad*” (with even more emphasis than usual). “May I have the tenth dance? You understand I have so much duty to do to-night.”

He shot a swift glance of contrite apology as he turned away, that surprised, flattered, yet slightly troubled Stella. What had he meant? Was he only going to be with her for one brief little dance? Well, what mattered it? He must do his duty, and she must be reasonable, knowing in her happy heart that of course he would have danced every dance with her, and taken her in first to supper, if he could.

The fourth dance was only beginning now in the great ball-room, with its polished floor like brown ice. The tenth dance was a long way off, and till it should come Mrs. Morice danced again and again with Gordon Muir, who remained faithful at her side.

“You will not desert me. I know no one here but yourself; do you mind?” she entreated shyly.

Did he mind?

Gordon was excited, proud, overjoyed to be with her. What mattered it to him that he was making deadly enemies of half a dozen dowagers, who were casting glances in his direction, while their daughters languished by their sides?

Young Muir went out a great deal in London. It was well known that he would be heir some day to his grandfather's old castle and large property in Scotland. At least a dozen girls were standing near, with whom he usually danced every night during the season; but, loyal to his lady's behest, he never so much as looked towards one of them.

"I must just wait for my dance with our host, you know, and have some supper afterwards; then I will go home," confidentially imparted Stella.

"Certainly," smiled her squire, his beautiful dark eyes aglow in answer to this implied appeal to his chivalry. "Only do you mind my leaving you one minute to ask my cousin, Lady Helen MacGregor, for a dance—the dance you are engaged to Middlesex? She would be hurt

otherwise; you see, we were brought up together as children."

Prettily dismissing him with a smiling nod, Stella was left alone beside the crowded doorway, and moved a little nearer behind the door, feeling solitary. All at once her own name caught her ear. People were talking of Mrs. Morice.

"What, is that the pretty woman in yellow, leading Gordon Muir by a chain to-night? Oh, and so she is Middlesex's late flame, they say."

"That is the lady. She has done wisely in providing herself with a substitute to-night, not to seem thrown over now that our host's engagement with Lady Ita Astleigh is given out."

"So! Is that really a settled affair, then?"

"Yes; there he is, dancing with her. They were together for a fortnight at Lord Astleigh's lately. She is only eighteen, and he is twenty years older, but desperately in love, they say."

Stella, who had felt herself start, then stiffen, listened in a strange way as if what the speakers were saying did not concern herself at all, but

was mere gossip about strangers. Then a mist came before her eyes, blurring all the crowd around her; her blood turned, so to speak, in its current; and her heart grew deadly sick. It was with difficulty that Stella kept her feet, and, through a loud throbbing in her ears, heard the concluding words.

“The wedding is to be very soon, I believe?”

“Yes, and for Lady Ita’s sake it is to be hoped that Middlesex will settle down now. She was only presented last spring, and was one of the beauties of the season.”

Then the mist partly cleared from her vision, and through all the confusion of her mind and the trembling that shook her body, Stella saw Middlesex’s goodly Saxon head above most of the whirling crowd in the centre of the room. She strained her eyes, and a break in the dancers the next moment showed her the little partner who was held in his arms.

That must be Lady Ita! The speakers had said Middlesex and she were dancing together.

The *fiancée* looked almost a child, she was so small, so freshly, daintily pretty in her white dress with no ornaments but a splendid

row of pearls round her young throat. Many eyes, like Stella's, were bent upon the pair, for Middlesex's future bride was naturally the star of the evening; and so lovely was Lady Ita, with her little golden head, fairy figure, and dainty grace, as of a child queen, laughing at yet exacting homage from her future lord and master, that an admiring buzz passed through the assemblage.

Stella felt herself suddenly old and haggard in her yellow gown by comparison. How different had been her youth to that of the smiling girl she gazed at with envy, and a burning sense of the injustice of fate.

That young creature looked so happy. Heavens! with such a pleasant past, such a glorious prospect before her, she must find it an easy task to be good.

A vision rose up before the forsaken rival's mind of an unhappy childhood, a home of discord and poverty, of her youth and beauty bartered to the highest bidder. Oh, why should one be so favoured by Providence, and another given no chance? Why? why?

Meanwhile Muir was being detained by his

cousin with searching, mocking inquiries on the subject of his "yellow lady," as Stella was already nicknamed.

Young Torquil MacGregor, Lady Helen's brother, standing near his sister, joined in the chaff, adding under his breath—

"She is a very pretty woman, old chap; but don't you think you have about done enough dancing to-night with her, unless you want to set every one talking?"

"She knows no one else," replied Gordon, angrily, yet anxiously stealing a glance to where his divinity stood alone. "I say, do come and be introduced, will you? there's a good fellow."

"No, no; please excuse me." MacGregor drew back. "There are so many of our own set here, you see. Besides," with a chuckle, "I couldn't think of trying to cut you out."

Before Muir could retrace his steps the tenth dance had begun, and Lord Middlesex came up to claim Stella, waiting alone in her agony.

Stella noticed with anguished bitterness the secret bliss that still lit the man's face, and rejuvenated his whole bearing, while a few

yards away, to boyish happiness. But this Middlesex tried to subdue, as he approached the late object of his fickle adoration, to an air of sympathy, even of well-feigned interest.

“You look pale,” he said with concern, “and you were so bright when you came this evening, too! Are you tired?”

“Take me away, please; quick! — anywhere!” Stella entreated in a stifled tone.

Middlesex promptly gave her his arm and turned sharply out of the doorway down a long gallery leading to the refreshment rooms. He stole a side glance or two at his partner, whose hand he could feel shaking on his arm; her knees were evidently almost incapable of supporting her. A stern look came into his blue eyes, almost a cynical expression on his usually pleasant, freshly ruddy face.

However, assuming carelessness excellently well, the host pointed out to his guest, as they went, some great battle-pieces on the walls by a famous painter, the green malachite vase given by the late Czar of the Russias to his father, and other objects of interest and art. There were several couples besides themselves

sitting out here, or walking about, and Middlesex's motto with women was invariably :
"Above all things, no scenes."

Desperately annoyed in secret, but still preserving his bland demeanour, Middlesex led his half-fainting guest towards the tea-room ; but at the end of the gallery turned sharply along another corridor, past heavy curtains, to his own study.

"We must not stay away long, or people will be talking," were his first words, as they now faced each other under the shaded light of a lamp. "Tell me quickly, what can I do for you? Have some brandy?"

"Is this true?" she panted, with both hands pressed to her heaving bosom. "Is it true what they are saying? Quick! Tell me! *It can't be!*" (Yet she knew it was true.)

Lord Middlesex stood opposite to her, coldly, with a gathering frown on his brow that deepened.

"Did you not get my letter, to-night?" he asked, in a strained tone. "I asked you particularly, if you were vexed by the news I wrote in it, not to come here."

“I got no letter ; none—none !” she wailed.
“If I was vexed ! Oh, my God !”

“Be reasonable, Stella ! I must have married some day. It is a necessity that is imposed upon all men of my rank. One doesn’t want the family estates and titles to pass to other heirs than one’s own,” he said bluntly.

Perhaps he hoped to rouse her spirit, that she would brace herself to meet the situation with the pride and *savoir faire* of women of his own class. But instead of this Stella only dropped limply into a chair, and sat there shivering, literally quaking from head to foot, her blue eyes staring widely, miserably at him.

Changing his mood, Middlesex tried expostulation ; reasoning, soothing words of regret. Vaguely he held out hopes he did not mean should be realized of future friendship. But still she never stirred.

He moved at last anxiously to the door, listening.

The music was still going on in the distance. But hark ! now its strains were ending—were over. He turned back hastily into the room.

“We have been here too long, Stella. I must go back again now and take the duchess to supper. Do not think me brutal, but I am a host, and one’s own ball is not the time or place for an *esclandre*. It is a great pity you did not get my letter this evening. I cannot understand it.”

Other words, to do him justice, were ready on Middlesex’s lips. He was sorry for his late love, heartily sorry; only, the least sign of tenderness would have been fatal just then. She might have burst into tears,—fainted. Great heavens! better seem a brute, utterly unfeeling, than run such a risk as that.

“Send Mr. Muir to me,” only came in answer from Stella’s trembling lips.

Lord Middlesex silently acquiesced, led her courteously down the gallery to a secluded seat at the head of the stairs, and quitted her with a look and bow of well-bred deference to her wishes. She dimly guessed that it was his final farewell.

A minute afterwards Gordon Muir joined Mrs. Morice.

“Take me home quick, please,” she said, hurriedly rising.

“Are you ill?” asked the boy tenderly, as they drove away together.

“I have stayed as long as I told you I would,” she answered, shivering, so that Gordon was terribly afraid she had taken a chill even through her velvet cloak that was fur-lined. “And—and—I am afraid of John.”

CHAPTER VI.

“There’s that betwixt you been which men remember
Till they forget themselves, till all’s forgot,
Till the deep sleep falls on them in that bed,
From which no morrow’s mischief knocks them up.”

GORDON Muir rang gently as the hansom stopped once more at the door which he and Mrs. Morice had so furtively quitted two hours before, to enjoy their much-wished-for ball.

Stella waited shivering beside him on the steps, in order to slip into the house quickly when her maid should answer the summons.

The door opened—but both pleasure-seekers started back, disagreeably astonished, as Mr. Morice himself confronted them.

He wore a grey dressing-gown, and as he held a candle up, his pale hatchet face, sparse grey hair, and the glittering expression of his eyes affected young Muir strongly. It

seemed like handing over a condemned culprit to a deadly enemy for instant execution.

Trying conciliation, the lad said, with attempted gaiety—

“I have brought Mrs. Morice quite safe home, you see, sir. It was a capital ball; first-rate.”

“I see. Good night.”

Morice's face looked so terrible as his eyes turned upon his wife, that her valiant champion hesitated. The husband sternly motioned Stella indoors, gave Gordon a grim nod as a gesture of dismissal, somewhat like the statue's mechanical movement in “Don Giovanni,” and shut the door.

Upon this Gordon was perforce obliged to take his departure; getting slowly into his waiting hansom and looking with great uneasiness at the house as he drove away.

Indoors, Morice placed the candle upon the hall table, folded his arms, and transfixed his wife, who stood confounded at this unusual spectacle.

Then the storm burst forth. There is no need to repeat the wrathful revilings, words of scorn, reproach, passionate invective, outpoured

like the seven vials, by the injured husband, upon the woman's head.

Stella stood white and still, and uttered never a word.

"Answer me!" cried Morice, maddened by her apparent insensibility — "answer me, wretch!"

But she said nothing.

Breathing hard, with livid face, the infuriated man stood glaring at her.

Stella seemed to hear, see it all in a terrible dream; to be a spectator at a painful drama, in which Stella Morice, whom she pitied, played the principal part, she herself, a third person, being onlooker. At last she spoke, almost quietly, with a stony manner—

"It is true. What is the use of so many words? Do with me what you wish."

"I wish and intend to divorce you. You shall not live under my roof and disgrace me any longer, or have the charge of bringing up your children."

At that she flung out her arms with a sharp cry.

"My little ones! No, no; you cannot be so cruel."

The action revealed the yellow gown that till now was concealed by her long cloak. Morice started on seeing it. The incident was but trivial, yet it was the final straw, the last drop that made his cup of bitterness run over.

“What! flaunting in colours!” he shouted, beside himself with anger at the sight. “You have not common decency or respect for the dead left; even that one wish of mine was of no consideration in your eyes. Out of my house! Why should my roof harbour such a shameless slut? Out with you!”

The unhappy man was as insane at that moment as many immured in asylums. Seizing his wife’s arm he tried to drag her to the door.

She resisted.

His grasp slipped, but he still held her cloak fast, endeavouring to pull her, while his other hand fumbled to push back the bolt of the door.

Stella unloosed the silver cloak-clasp that was pressing painfully on her throat, and so releasing herself suddenly, rushed across the hall and escaped upstairs, where she took refuge in the nursery.

Behind her there was a fall; a dull groan. But in her terror the fugitive heard nothing but her own flying footsteps.

As the cloak was flung in his arms Morice staggered back at the shock. His foot slipped, and, falling heavily against the marble table, he became senseless. On recovering consciousness presently, the suffering man found himself supported between the footman and a faithful butler, who had been twenty years in his service. There was a pool of blood on the floor.

"Come, sir, let us help you to your study," said the elder servant, who had been sitting up surreptitiously, the lady's-maid having warned the rest of the household that a domestic storm was impending. "I have made you up a bed upon your sofa there; you will be better soon."

"I am going away, Perkins, to-morrow, to my sister; she will nurse me. To-morrow, remember! I charge you to help me leave this house—to-morrow!"

"You may rely on me, sir."

Through the night watches the wealthy, well-known lawyer lay awake in misery of mind and aching head.

How was it that a pale girl's face looked at him through the darkness, a vision from the far away days of his youth? He had forgotten her for a quarter of a century. A young maid she used to be in his mother's service, trustful, simple-minded. He had put out of his mind long years ago the memory of poor Emma's passionate pleadings, of her broken-hearted reproaches. But it seemed borne in upon him that he was suffering in his turn *now* as she had *then*.

Wearily Morice tried to turn upon his couch : he was in hell on earth that night. Surely he also had sinned then against his neighbour, and his selfishness was doomed to be expiated by the innocent, then unborn. 'Love worketh no ill to its neighbour' rang again and again in his mind.

Where was she, alive or dead? he wondered; she and her child. Of course his mother soon turned her out of the house—women are so hard upon each other, he then said. He had been absent just when she was sent away, and she was a proud girl and had never written to him afterwards. She had actually supposed he

would make a lady of her. Poor foolish soul! And now he could not even remember her second name.

Next day, looking suddenly changed from middle-age to the bent figure of an old man grey and miserable, John Morice was helped out of his house into the waiting brougham, never to return.

CHAPTER VII.

“O Love, thou of the bitter bow.”

“No sign, no sign for all thy kisses past!
For all thy soft speech that hath lied, and lied!
No help, no cry to come back! Ah, at last
I know that no real love from me I cast;
Nought but a dream.”

THREE days Mrs Morice lay ill in bed after the terrible night of the ball at Middlesex House. During the first twenty-four hours she neither spoke nor stirred, but lay with her face turned to the wall. Only for her breathing, as the servants whispered to each other, they might have doubted if the prostrate form was conscious at all, her open eyes had such a stupefied, glazed expression.

Then the nurse, fearing her mistress would get brain fever, at last brought Rosebud and the baby downstairs and softly put them

on her bed. The two little downy-headed, cooing children crept close to their mother's breast, patted her face with soft tiny fingers aspread. At that she roused, hugged them hungrily in her arms, devoured them with kisses.

Afterwards Stella hardly allowed her idolized treasures to be taken away from her sight for a moment. Though she was too ill to amuse them, the little white-froaked creatures sat for hours nestled in her silk duvet, playing gravely as the nurse told them little girls should. Perhaps the instinct of womanhood already stirred within their baby breasts, and they understood their mother must not be disturbed.

After the third day, Gordon Muir, who had repeatedly called to inquire, was told that Mrs. Morice was better; she had come downstairs, and would see him.

He entered eagerly, and found Stella sunk in cushions in a corner of the sofa. She was very pale, her generally high colour faded to the faintest pink tinge, so that, wearing a white plush tea-gown veiled in clouds of lace down

the front, and round her throat and wrists, the most colour she seemed to have was in the blue of her turquoise eyes.

"Are you better? Do tell me, had you to endure any fresh trouble? I have been so terribly anxious, but was afraid of making inquiries of the servants," began her faithful vassal, eagerly, tenderly taking Stella's hand in his own. He thought in his heart what a dream she looked—fragile, ethereal, and with a strange smile, that did not seem earthly, flitting over her face.

Stella answered wearily, as if from far away.

"We had a frightful quarrel that night after you left. You may as well know now, as later, what has happened. My husband says he means to divorce me."

"*What!*" Gordon cried, disbelieving his ears and starting back in horror-struck amazement. "How *dare* he say such a thing? and to you—you of all women! Why, it is absolutely laughable, if it was not so disgraceful. He has no shadow of grounds! He—he—oh! I never heard of such a burning shame." Then, with a sudden rush of tenderness, "No wonder you

were ill! How can you take it so quietly. looking like an angel all the while?"

"I take it quietly, because all anger seems burnt out of my being. I feel no more than if I were a very shell of a woman, with no soul, no heart, no feeling left inside me. What can any other troubles signify now, if only I can keep my children? I must try to do that at all costs. At any rate I should be free."

"True," echoed Muir, with a frantic burst of exultant emotion. "Ha, yes; you would be free! After all, let the world say as they will, is not your liberty, your peace of mind, of more consideration than aught else? You have been miserable with this man, and it is time at last that you should be happy. Stella! Stella!"—and he threw himself upon his knees by her side, looking surely the most adoring and gallant, if youthful, squire that any woman had ever seen at her feet since the old chivalric days of the courts of Love in the sunny lands of southern France, his whole honest, boyish soul glowing in his eyes—"listen! You have given me a glimpse of heaven—a paradise I have never dared even to dream of yet. Say

you will marry me when you are free. My queen ! My soul's very soul ! There is nothing I would not have laid at your feet before—my life, ambition, future, fortune, all but my honour. Think, if I so worshipped you hitherto, what I must feel now that you have suffered so much for my sake. Promise to be my wife.”

Gordon had caught her hand gently in his own two trembling, reverent ones, and was covering it with kisses.

“Your wife now ! What have I suffered for your sake ?” repeated Stella, pushing her hair from her brow in confused bewilderment.

“Yes, yes,” babbled the boy, too deliriously happy to heed her astonished looks. “Oh, what a fool Mr. Morice is to believe that an angel like you has ever wronged him ; when our friendship was so innocent, almost a holy attachment I might say. As if I could have ventured to insult *you* by dreaming my star would have stooped from her high heaven of goodness and purity even for my sake. And this dotard would dare to disgrace you before the world on my account !”

“What do you mean?” uttered Stella, supporting herself with both hands as she rose, withdrawing as far as possible, while a slow amazed understanding began to dawn across her mind.

“Did I say disgrace? Oh, forgive me, it shall be an honour,” eagerly babbled Muir, his handsome face flushing happily, a humble, adoring smile lighting his eyes as he still knelt, softly putting out a trembling hand as he sought to lift and kiss the lace on her wrist. “Only trust me. Your good name shall shine yet as bright as before; as the sun in the sky. All the world shall know how spotless it is, although this man is base enough to imagine I would have soiled it.”

“*You—you!* Ha, ha, ha!”

A mirthless laugh, a laugh of despair, came from Stella. She could not control her hysterical emotion, even though she saw young Muir’s eyes fill with astonished reproach, while he rose to his feet. “Why, my dear boy, John Morice is not going to take legal proceedings against *you*.”

“No? Then *who* is the man?”

“Lord Middlesex.”

At that brief answer Muir turned white as ashes and trembled.

“But your husband can have no grounds,” he managed to utter low and hoarsely. “You must have a good lawyer, that is all. Lord Middlesex will see to that, I suppose; if not, command all my resources. You will—you must be cleared.”

“No.”—— .

After that one little word there was a dreadful silence in the room. It was only broken by a choking sound presently from the young man. His features were twitching convulsively, his face was ghastly gray, and he clutched at his necktie to loosen its pressure upon his throat. Then, with both hands grasping the back of a slight gilt chair, he bent forward. Strange, what a similar expression there was in this young, goodly face to the deadly jealousy and wrath that had lately disfigured John Morice's older visage.

Stella looked at her interlocutor with a curious, stony indifference. It shot across her mind how Middlesex had said that Gordon Muir's face might be a terrible one on occasion.

"*What do you mean?*" Gordon whispered, almost hissing the words.

Stella felt tired of scenes. She had no feeling left, no pity, emotion, nought save where her babies upstairs were concerned.

"Let us end this," she said, with freezing impatience. "Can you not understand? I never cared for my husband, as you know. Lord Middlesex was the only man I ever loved, or ever shall; and he has forsaken me."

Crash! The back of the fragile chair Muir grasped was broken. He pushed the thing aside, and drawing himself up to his full height, stood with folded arms before Stella, looking—looking.

Under the unutterable scorn and mute reproach of those eyes the pale woman quailed. Selfishly, completely engrossed with her own pain, until now Stella had never given Gordon's feelings more than a passing thought. Her own ill-treatment in life from girlhood up; her own agony on being abandoned by Middlesex—these, these alone had filled her mind. She could spare no pity for her husband's distress, which seemed only a fitting retribution for the harm he had

wrought her by their ill-suited marriage. John Morice was the cause of all her troubles.

But Gordon Muir ! He had never wronged Stella by word or deed. Far, far from that !

In the intense silence which followed, Stella felt a sense of clairvoyance ; she seemed reading the young man's mind, divining the shock, the horror with which he heard with his own ears her cynical avowal—saw clearly at last, now her hand tore the scales from his eyes.

“*I—I,*” she gasped, with dry lips, “*perhaps have not acted quite fairly by you.*”

Muir smiled. It was such a smile as a Red Indian at the stake might give the squaw who tortured him worst. Imagine an executioner saying to a victim on the rack, “Excuse me, but perhaps I hurt you.”

Not fair to him ! Oh, it might have made angels weep and devils laugh to know what a dear saint he had believed her to be ! How he had worshipped her, as reverently, passionately, as ever Petrarch did Laura ! How, while she had lured him on with false, sweet words and looks, he had plunged into debt for her sake ; broken with his family ; renounced his soldier's

ambition ; would gladly have died to save her sweet self a passing pain.

“From this hour I shall never believe in any woman !” were the only words that came from Gordon Muir’s lips. “And I will never forgive you !”

“Gordon ! Gordon ! Don’t say that. Come back !” cried Stella, stretching out her hands in entreaty. But for the first time she appealed to her so lately faithful squire in vain.

The only sound which came in reply was the closing of the door.

Gordon Muir almost stumbled going downstairs—he was so blind with rage that caught his heart with big throbs, choked his throat, seethed in his brain.

“Gone ! he, too !” sighed Stella to herself, gazing blankly at the door. Then she turned faint.

CHAPTER VIII.

“Oh, World! whose days like sunlit waters glide,
Whose music links the midnight with the morrow,
Who for thine own hast Beauty, Power, and Pride—
Oh, World, what art thou? And the World replied,
‘A husk of pleasure round a heart of sorrow.’”

THE next afternoon a chilling rain was falling that soaked into the very marrow of the few pedestrians out in the sloppy London streets.

Stella Morice stood, however, under the verandah between her dining-room and the somewhat dismal back garden. She wanted fresh air, but would not go out into the streets, for fear of meeting any of her acquaintances. For already the story of her conjugal quarrel, and the divorce suit which was to be instituted, had leaked out and was sweet to gossips' tongues. Idly her dulled eyes looked at a virginia creeper, torn down lately by the wind, and allowed by a careless gardener to fall from

the iron balcony pillar, round which it should have clung. Now its dull crimson leaves lay in the damp earth of the border, stamped by careless feet into the mire.

“It is like me ; its prop is gone,” she thought darkly to herself. “Winter is coming, and it will wither away smirched and down-trodden. Neither of us has the strength to raise ourselves again to the old position. Perhaps there may be a certain rest in lying there. No more necessity now to struggle to keep up appearances, to propitiate the great goddess of the English nation—Propriety ! All over ! the lies to servants and husband ; the terrors of discovery ; the agony lest the hints of smiling friends (*friends*, forsooth !) should mean hidden sneers. Yes, it is a rest—like death ! What do other women in my position generally do ? Let me see. Most keep quiet for a time, till the nine days’ gossip is forgotten in the ceaseless stir of this World’s Market. Then they creep abroad again, and coax or cringe their way into good-natured or fast hostesses’ houses, mostly in a lower set than their former one. Mrs. Pentongue took to writing bitter society articles, and is

dreaded and conciliated by those whom she might injure. How she lashed her rivals in those essays, 'The Husband Snatcher,' and 'Married Girls,' as they like to call themselves, besides 'The Merry Wives of London'! Ah, if I could only find a safety-valve like that!"

Mrs. Morice's face darkened as she thought of a certain manuscript hidden in a pigeon-hole of her escritoire upstairs, that had been returned with an editor's brief refusal. It was the crude outpouring of her wrongs, as she held them to be, an indictment of her husband in passionate words and bad grammar.

"My Master, by a Married Slave;" so she entitled this, her first and last composition. Lord Middlesex, to whom she showed it in secret, had smiled provokingly, and suggested that he should furnish a companion picture—for the honour of his sex—and call it, "My Missis, by her Man." At the time Stella felt aggrieved, and a pretty quarrel and reconciliation followed. Now—reviewing the incident—she bit her lip.

"Of course! Being a man, he took the man's part; they all do. How men invariably

league together! If we only were to form such a co-operative union against them, where the general rights of womanhood are concerned, we should be dealt with on more even terms. I am certain many a woman would agree with me, if that brute of an editor had published my article."

Then her busy thoughts turned to the various *divorcées* she knew of, who, anxious to re-establish themselves in the good opinion of Mrs. Grundy, took to East End visiting, and were ostentatiously charitable and devoted to the sick during a cholera epidemic.

"Could I ever abase myself before society to the horrible extent of being a hypocrite for its sake?" Stella asked herself with her old high-spirited scorn. "Stay—not for its sake! For the children. . . . But he may take them from me! Oh, heavens! I could not live without them! Never! They may tear Rose from my arms, but I will disgrace myself rather than give up my baby to be brought up by the Morice family. . . . Yes, the children; the children! Only for them I spurn society with its cant and shams. It is for their children's sake that

men insist upon women leading better lives than themselves—the fathers. They compound for their own sins by damning ours.” She ground her teeth with a furious sense of injustice, ready to arraign the creative power which had made men stronger, and given them a freedom in their lives that is denied to the beings of the maternal sex, if these are true to their instinct of devotion to their children.

Even as Stella stood there so thinking, her husband was delivering the farewell sentences of his address in a celebrated case which had been looked forward to by the public for many days. It was the finest speech John Morice ever made, many whispered, watching him with the more interest that nudges and significant glances were being exchanged as to why he looked so pale and ill and old. There was much sympathy for the well-known Queen’s counsel, as, in spite of evident weakness, he rose to the occasion, and his mind had never been more lucid, his grasp of the subject stronger, nor his concluding peroration more touching.

It was over, and amidst a slight buzz of applause Morice was about to sit down. To the con-

sternation of those whose eyes were still fixed on him, he turned livid, tried to steady himself, then fell into the arms of the persons nearest.

They carried him out of court into an adjacent room. A doctor was sent for in haste. But the supposed fainting fit had been that great summons which will knock at the door of each one of our hearts, bidding the soul come out and away from its House of Earth.

John Morice was no longer a "soul bearing about a corpse" in life. He had been seized with one of his former terrible heart-attacks, and was dead.

That evening the body was borne back to Mr. Morice's late home—his no longer. Nothing was his own now but the deeds he had done and the speeches he had spoken in life. These intangible things are all which the dead are free to keep as personal property. More they may perchance take away with them of memory, affection, learning; all that belongs to heart and mind and soul, for aught we know. Those things that are not seen, let us hope, may be eternally theirs.

Stella had passed through various exciting

scenes during the past week ; it seemed to herself that she could not bear more and live. Yet this last shock was in some degree the most appalling of all those she had experienced, although, perhaps, the least painful.

The open door, the bearers carrying a covered stretcher from outer darkness into the warmth and light of the house, conveying at the same time a suggestion of painful uselessness, seeing that the late owner of those servants and rooms felt nothing more of warmth or comfort. Stiff and stark lay the body under its screening pall. But the soul had fled away from life, as sang the old Saxon minstrel, like a bird that having fluttered through the open window into the fire-lighted hall, where men and women sat about the hearth in talk and mirth, stays there awhile, but soon flies once more out into the darkness and chill of the night—who knoweth whither ?

That scene was indelibly imprinted in the wife's memory. The hushed voices and footfalls of the strange men who came in ; the gaping faces in the street outside. Midmost of all, the awful inanimate something, that was no one

now, yet which was so reverently carried into the dining-room and laid there on a couch in the middle, in horrible contrast with the memories of good cheer connected with the room, like the death's head at an Egyptian feast : " Memento mori ! "

Looking on at a little distance from it all—the mistress of the house, yet not feeling that she any longer had the right to give directions where *he* was concerned — Stella trembled exceedingly. Death had never come near her before. She was horror-struck at the manner of her own deliverance—even shocked at herself that the sensation of being free—oh, strange, black-garbed liberty!—*would* pierce through the consternation and pity that verily, at first, flooded her mind.

She would have given, much, very much, to know her husband still alive, if only he might never come anigh herself. She was sorry for him, the saddened, jealous aging man, who had said such terrible, cutting words to her lately. She had never wished to see his face again. She could forgive, she could beg to be forgiven ; but it was painful to see the eyes near one, and

hear the voice, of a person one disliked. Right thankful she would have been if only she could have known John Morice in health and life once more, happy and prosperous, wedded, maybe, to some other woman, but nevermore likely to come near herself or the children again.

Ah, the children ! Stella crept away upstairs to her own room and shut herself in.

It was wicked to feel such unspeakable relief. But there ! Now her darlings could not be wrested from her.

Later on that same evening she was called upon to see one of the most trusted friends of her deceased husband. This was the solicitor who had managed most of John Morice's private business.

"You are a lucky woman, Mrs. Morice," he remarked dryly ; "for I may as well tell you that poor Morice, only yesterday, gave me directions to draft a new will for him—very different to the one which will now be read and acted upon. In fact, I have already drawn it out, but the poor fellow has not lived to sign it. He intended to make an heiress of your eldest daughter, without mention of any other person.

As matters stand, you will have a handsome allowance by your marriage settlement."

"I shall not profit by that." Mrs. Morice threw up her head, and looked her informant straight in the face.

He privately thought her brazen for doing so; hard even to the memory of the dead. But he did not understand.

She went on, "From what you say, Rose will inherit, I imagine, an ample allowance during her minority, which should sufficiently pay the usual expenses of a guardian as well as for her own education. Is not that the case? Yes, I thought so. Well, I will accept only just what sum any other guardian would require, and bring her up on that myself—not a penny more!"

"This is a mere quixotic notion, my dear madam. We shall see; but I am pretty sure you will not be able to carry it out," responded the man of business, who did not care a straw for sentiment. "Probably you will change your ideas by-and-by."

Stella only smiled scornfully. She meant to keep her word.

CHAPTER IX.

“A merry heart goes all the day,
Your sad tires in a mile-a.”

TRIL-L-L-L ! sang a canary as a gleam of wintry sunshine glorified a shabby, small sitting-room.

Only a fourth-floor London attic, but it looked clean, homely, and cosy that frosty day, with the vivifying sunbeams streaming through the window-panes. The canary plainly thought so, for it trilled again louder and louder, and its burden was: “Food is good, water sweet, and a pleasant thing it is to behold the sun.”

“Bless Bobbie, he is right! How many little daily things there are to make one feel glad, after all! A day like this just makes me as brisk and happy as a bird, and you are pretty well too, are you not, darling?” said Mary Dawson, one of the two other inmates of the room. These two were of humankind.

An assenting sound (think it not unkind, good Mary, if the chronicler can best describe it as a grunt) came from the second individual at rest upon the sofa. This was an elderly, very stout invalid, who lay helpless as a log.

The first speaker was sewing busily at a table laden with silks and gold twist. She was a little woman, unmarried, over thirty, neatly dressed, but wearing too thin clothes for the wintry weather. Nevertheless, she looked just as cheerful as if she were wrapped in fur and velvet. There surely never was a heartier, more lovable Goody Two-shoes. Every one who knew her—very few people they were, after all—agreed she was “nice;” though none had ever praised her looks in higher terms than a Scotch minister’s wife, who declared the “wee body” was bonny.

Mary wore her soft dark hair brushed back plainly from her face; her almond-shaped eyes matched her hair in colour, and were dovelike in expression; while her mouth tried hard to be pretty, for it was small and sweet-lipped, but spoilt by being overfull of teeth.

At school the other girls used to tease poor

Mary about her fine African ivories, and jokingly urge her to make money by selling them, and substituting a less expensive-looking set.

“It would be so much more in keeping, for a quiet mouse like you,” they declared; and possibly they were right.

However, the said teeth were not ugly; and Mary’s little mouth, as if tired of trying to hide them, had given up the attempt, and relaxed into something between a constant look of expectancy and a dawning smile.

Short time had Mary Dawson to think of her appearance as she cheerily embroidered for hours with shining, flying needle, that was almost as delicate as an artist’s brush for painting church lilies and saints in stiff draperies; or better still, imitating the exquisite blending of Oriental hues in gorgeous traceries. The very satin on which it was her privilege to work made the attic seem quite a fairy palace some days: then there were variety and interest in the frequent change of design.

Thus the days which were passed by both inhabitants of the little “chamber on the wall”—as Mary playfully called it in allusion to the

one made by the woman of Shunem in expectation of divine blessings—were happy in having no history, but brimming with incident. Indeed, in this contented person's opinion, they were so delightfully full of occupation and small (very small) pleasures, that she often wished for an extra hour to be added to the twenty-four.

There was her darling to feed and dress the first thing in the morning; then the latter had to be assisted in here on the sofa. Next, the morning's sewing was a pleasure while the canary sang. By noontide followed an early "dinner of herbs and love therewith" to be partaken of, which was a welcome hour of refreshment to them both.

As Mary was wont to say, it also gave them quite a feeling of companionship to imagine how many other workers were resting and enjoying likewise their midday meal—ploughmen, after driving a fine team of horses straight and true across the big bare acres, turning fresh furrows, of which the earthy fragrance was pleasant in their nostrils as to the patriarch Isaac; hedgers, after laying low and stacking

in faggots a hillside copse. One could fancy how all the branches to their last year's twigs glowed in russet or orange brown warmth of hue, contrasting with the wintry blue sky, while underfoot lay withered heaps of rustling leaves, such as wicked elves used to hide as treasure in the ground and tempt foolish peasants to dig for in the hope of finding gold. But, if dead, all the leaves had not fallen, however, for here and there a stray one in the still standing brushwood clung feebly to its parent bough, displaying so pure a yellow or fiery a crimson as lit the secluded spot with a touch of glory.

Oh, there were more to be pictured; many more of hearty, hungry diners, sharing in the noontide's relaxation. Merry English sailors on board some good ship, far out in ocean waters, of which the sublime surrounding ring was unbroken by any other object to the horizon, while the nearer waves showed foam-flakes and glittering smiles in the sunlight and breeze. Or again—hey presto!—that magician, the mind, called up a band of rosy, eager children trooping home from school, along the lanes. One almost heard their noisy clatter of

feet, and merry outcries, as boys stole each other's caps, while little girls, good as they always are, helped the still smaller ones to race along between them.

Whilst Mary's busy tongue prattled on, conjuring up many such scenes for Darling's and her own delectation, this little embroideress never guessed that she possessed a gift better than gold or silver, a charm which makes its owner as happy as a king, and yet that only expressed itself in common-sense chatter and sober imagery.

"It's nearly—as—good as a book," Mrs. Dawson used to murmur at times, with condescending approval.

That praise was quite sufficient to wreath the narrator's face with smiles.

"There, my nonsense does some good, if it only makes my poor dear forget her weakness," Mary would tell herself in satisfaction.

And although she did not suppose herself clever, and knew she could not have written down her thoughts to earn any number of shillings, yet the improvisatrice felt it a gladness to have this sense of sympathy with

humankind. It was delicious to enjoy cheerful country sights and sounds and the repose of well-earned ease with one's fellow-beings, so to speak.

By afternoon this Goody Two-shoes, as had been her father's pet name for her, was ready for a fresh supply of work, which task she attacked invigorated, while her invalid dozed. The canary was taken out of his cage for exercise now, and the patter of his tiny claws upon the floor was merry in her ears, while the tricks of that bird were past belief, and made even the bedridden mother, helpless for years, quite laugh at times.

When it grew dusk, really too dark to see any longer, there followed a cup of tea, just to cheer them both. Then the blind was pulled down, the lamp lit, and the hearth swept clean. Really, what with the fire-glow and the cosiness of feeling shut in from the outer world, the small upper chamber was so snug, homelike, and altogether bright that, as Mary regularly observed, looking round with satisfaction, it was quite a treat when evening came.

Towards twilight the mother was wont to

rouse, albeit feebly. Then she would begin telling stories of her own past youth, or of Mary's childhood, in an indistinct voice, of which the monotony was yet as soothing as running water in her daughter's ears. And we all know how delightfully it murmurs through long grasses, and forget-me-nots, and tall rich buttercups, recalling days of long ago.

Darling was quite happy, and enjoyed herself when she talked like this, speech being often difficult to her, poor afflicted soul. Unfortunately she sometimes forgot the end of her tales and would weep at her own want of memory. So it obliged her daughter to be careful in listening, and to know when to break the narrative, judiciously, by some little pretence of a dropped thimble, or so forth, after which the thin rill of talk was easily directed into a safer channel.

Later on Darling was once more fed, being unable to lift her own hands to her mouth, and carefully assisted to bed. It was such a comfort that she slept well. What more blessed gift can Heaven bestow? "He giveth His beloved sleep."

At this hour Mary's holiday began. Now she enjoyed "a good read."

No one can be healthy and cheerful in body and mind without some amusement, was a rule that this little woman always laid down for herself with a sagacious nod of her head. Whereupon she would pull her chair close to the fire, until the latter burnt out, draw the lamp nearer, and fairly gloat over the pages of either honoured Sir Walter's romances or well-worn, calf-bound *Spectators* and *Tatlers*, Mrs. Dawson having fortunately inherited a small store of such old-fashioned volumes.

"Thank God for a good novel," Mary used to say to herself, as gratefully as she said her grace before and after meals. "Learning is bread and meat for the mind," she playfully declared, if ever minded to explain her views to Darling, her only listener. "But a novel means fruit, delicacies, to my mental palate. It is the cheap luxury of our civilization. Music and pictures cost far more to see and hear. And how dull the lives of rather badly off women, or sick ones, must have been long ago when they could not spin! Just think of it!"

So—unless work pressed more than usual—hey presto! Goody Two-shoes was transported in the twinkling of an eye into another age and all manner of gaieties and excitement, till both fire and lamp had burned admonishingly low. And so to bed.

Furthermore, there was change, too, in the lives of Mary Dawson and her mother, never doubt it! Days when Mary went out of doors with her finished embroidery to deliver, and to bring back more. Then her eyes watched the life in the streets with an all-embracing gaze of sympathy that was always glad, unless—— Well, unless this little woman saw a tired dray-horse losing foothold in wet weather, straining its muscles agonizingly under the load, its poor hoofs scraping vainly the while on the greasy asphalt; or a drunken woman—the shame of England—a degrading sight, so rarely witnessed in other countries; or any other of the painful spectacles, the horrible contrasts of riches and bestial squalor, gilded youth and careworn old age, that in London, more than any place on earth, make one's heart swell with disgust and pity, and ache ever afterwards at such memories.

But Mary found no lack of more agreeable themes.

Why, there was really too much to fill her brightening eyes with interest, and delay her brisk footsteps. Like the description of Primeval Man in the Symposium, she would fain have owned two faces looking opposite ways, in order to enjoy thoroughly these brief holidays.

What pleasure to glance at the fashions in the shop-windows, and bring home exciting news that all last year's ideas were turned topsy-turvy, and, instead of clinging skirts, Watteau bunched gowns were "the thing" which like

"Summer is i-comen in,"

according to the old English four-part song of the thirteenth century.

Besides capes and bonnets and a hundred more feminine fallals, just think of the jewellers' splendours, and the ever-varying novelties as to knickknacks for drawing-room prettiness! Tramp, tramp, and there come the Foot Guards marching with the swing of one man. How their red uniforms light up the dull,

“unlovely street”! Then here dash by a pair of splendid steppers in a carriage with a ducal coronet; a lovely woman looks out. How beautiful she is! And—still greater treat to the loyal British soul—occasionally one has the glimpse of a royal carriage and a passing princess.

Oh, it went hard but what Mary brought back news enough of the big human hive to keep Darling in her quiet cell amused for many an evening. How the invalid’s eyes brightened in expectancy when her listening ear caught the first sound of her daughter’s step on the stair; she even half rose from her pillow when Mary appeared, seeming to bring in a whiff of outdoor breeze.

“Well! what have you seen?” Mrs. Dawson would murmur indistinctly.

“Oh, ever so much, Darling. I have quantities to tell you. The street hawkers are selling the *funniest* toy. I must describe it. And, dear me! there is such startling news in the posters—of a hurricane that has destroyed two towns in America. My goodness! what an excitement we had in the ’bus to-day, when

we were all stopped to let a demonstration of the unemployed go by! Not that I am likely to be one of them—though I was so sorry for them—for you *never, never* saw more exquisite work than I got to-day. Dear me! where shall I begin first——?”

On such evenings as this, the invalid 'was quite enlivened. And far beyond these little incidents was the variety of the yearly changes of nature.

Spring came pleasantly, even to the dull street where the fretful sufferer and the sunny-minded embroideress lived out their allotted ^{span} of earth-life. Summer was glorious with its welcome warmth. Time enough to think of the sweltering dog-days when they come. Some years one has really none of such very hot weather.

How the first June days revived the sick woman's feeble frame, while mignonette and geraniums bloomed in the window, and one could buy watercresses for tea, even strawberries when these were cheap! There were a hundred and one other summer signs too. Nesting sparrows, darting house swallows, a

stray white butterfly in the street. All being in unison with the great yearly change that far beyond London's miles of houses had stirred the land to blossom and bring forth crops; making the sea waves to sparkle blue and fresh in the sunlight, and all mankind, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, to rejoice.

Our friends by no means thought themselves poor; except as a matter of comparison.

"Why does no wise man or woman write on 'The Pleasures of Poverty'?" exclaimed Mary. "It has so many exquisite little delights that the poor rich people never can enjoy. Now consider," went on this unconscious optimist, half talking to herself and half to Darling, as was her habit, for it sounded more cheerful for both of them, "having your little pension makes all the difference. If you are ill, and need the doctor and more medicines than usual, well, there is the reserve fund! No need to distress ourselves."

A grunt of doubtful import from the bed-ridden one, who mostly answered by such sounds, in varying tone, interpreted by Mary as she pleased.

“Yes, the widow’s cruse never fails with us. It is wonderful,” went on this cheerful person on this particular day; “but our life is quite an oasis in the desert, if I may so express it, with fairly quiet neighbours above and below us, and a sufficient annuity laid by for rainy days. It is like having a plank to cling to in the sea when others are forced to swim; it is very nearly as good as having a boat. Really rich people have boats, or ships, so to speak.”

In this manner Mary uttered her daily chaunt of rejoicing thankfulness, while the canary, too, sang for gladness.

On the particular day of which the present chapter speaks, a stone fell in the quiet pool of this young woman’s life. It came by post.

“Here is a letter from Stella Morice; my school friend, you remember, Darling,” said Mary, eying the envelope. “You know I have told you how lovely she used to be; rather wayward, but outspoken and honest, and so clever in many ways. She used to trim up my old hats afresh, and I did her drudgery lessons, as she called them, for her. She hated sums

and grammar, but she was ahead of most of us in history or anything relating to philosophy. Then she had such daring ideas. Many of the girls used to be quite shocked at what she said. Only her theories, you know, dear—odd ways of asking why a thing should be right because it is custom.”

All the while Mary spoke she was occupied in feeding her charge, which was a slow process allowing of no interruption lest food should turn cold. When this task was over she carefully cut open the envelope with as much expectancy as if she were likely to read the announcement of some personal good fortune.

Dear, dear! How all her face saddened and altered!

“Why, Darling, this is bad news, I am afraid! Mrs. Morice writes in low spirits. It seems she is in great trouble, she does not say what, and wants to see me—if I can come to her—as soon as possible. Poor soul! she says that I am her only friend. Would you mind very much if I went this afternoon?”

A few moments of silence followed. Then Darling was understood to reply fretfully, like

a spoilt child, that Mrs. Morice was one of those women who cry out about nothing. Once before she had sent for Mary to console her, because her husband would not allow her to give a dance instead of a dinner-party.

"Come, it was not quite like that, dear. It was on account of their little quarrel," interposed Mary under her breath. Then louder, "This time I am afraid she really does want me."

Darling went on tearfully, turning her head on the pillow—which was nearly equivalent, if we think of it, to walking out of the room—that she was a hindrance, she knew, and regretted being in her daughter's way, but unfortunately could not help herself; maybe, however (this in a tone of sniffing hope), it would not be for long.

"Now—now—now!" ejaculated Mary, reproach, encouragement, consolation, all mingling in her voice, while she rapidly and inwardly asked herself, "Was there not enough sugar in her tea, perhaps? That always makes her melancholy, poor dear!"

"What a thing to say! Why, as if I would

leave you for all the fine ladies in London ! No, indeed ! Stella Morice is my friend, and she may be in great trouble ; but still, if you were to want me, and I away, I should never forgive myself."

"No—go !" uttered the invalid with generous impulse. Mrs. Dawson spoke clearer than usual, because carefully mouthing her words, so that what to the careless onlooker might have appeared pitiable or ridiculous in the working of her poor, partly paralyzed muscles, was beautiful in the eyes of the daughter, who understood the effort it cost the sufferer. "Wrong of me—selfish—very selfish. . . . Mrs. Cox will stay with me—very nice."

This latter personage was a cheery charwoman who lived in the basement. A kind-hearted giantess, really quite agreeable to look at when tidied up.

"I'll take care of her, bless her, miss," said Mrs. Cox, when privately interviewed. "I'll take the bird out and keep him from flying in the fire, and I'll make Mrs. Dawson a pancake for tea—she likes my pancakes. Nothing, miss, would give me greater pleasure

than to do a little good turn for you, if you'd allow me to consider it just as one neighbour may help another. No, I'd be affronted otherwise, Miss Dawson; I would indeed."

So away went Mary out-of-doors on her errand of sympathy, her mind being more full at first of the sick mother within-doors than of her friend's unknown distress.

"So good of my poor dear! just like her," mused the daughter, with pitying pride in her heart. "It is so natural; the human nature in her feeling weak and lonely, therefore crying out, but the higher self triumphing immediately afterwards, as it always does. It is quite a lesson to live with her."

CHAPTER X.

"There be many that say, Who will show us any good? Lord, lift Thou up the light of Thy countenance upon us."

"Oh, what a blow! To think that your kind, good husband is actually *dead*, my poor Stella! My dear, how sorry I am for you! What a dreadful loss this must be! You must feel it terribly!"

"No; you will think that the worst of the matter. I, who am a hardened, unhappy creature, think it is the best of it, that I do not feel his death a loss," replied Stella, gloomily.

The two women were alone together in Stella's large bedroom, that was tastefully, even luxuriously furnished, like a boudoir. In Mary Dawson's eyes, as she looked around, so charming a room as this, full of books, pictures, china, easy-chairs, and full-length mirrors, was

a chamber Paradise in which it would be almost pleasant to find one's self invalided.

Stella Morice was lying on her bed with a face as white as the large down pillows, frilled with lace, that supported her half upright. She wore a loose black silk dressing-gown, trimmed with white lace, and long afterwards Mary remembered how it had been a little unfastened below the throat, and that where the lace fell on the creamy soft bosom, this was actually the whiter of the two textures. Stella looked like a woman of snow with fire in her eyes; her voice, low, vibrant with emotion, lingered like sweet wicked music afterwards in the hearer's somewhat shocked ears.

Certainly Mrs. Morice was unlike her sisterhood in general—how or why Mary could not define; but, this fact accepted, its corollary was a vague impression that, being obviously different, Stella ought in fairness to be differently judged. In after-years Mary appreciated better with experience that it was the charm of manner in Stella which had so strongly impressed her; that she felt a glimmering understanding as to the fascination this woman had for many

men, and the strong temptations to which their admiration thereby exposed herself.

“No wonder this attraction has been called a fatal gift. Whatever woman has been dowered with it at birth ought to look upon it as a great responsibility,” mused Goody Two-shoes.

But, then, she was a queer, old-fashioned little body, so precise in her notions of duty as to talents received and accounts to be rendered for them, that Stella was wont to tell her she was a moral book-keeper who tried to help Providence by keeping her own ledger straight.

To return from this digression to the two friends.

Mary Dawson had taken off her cloth jacket and black hat, and was seated, a trim and tidy figure, by the bed in a curtained recess. Here the widow lay shivering, but with burning hands, under her velvet and silken eider-down.

Mary listened, aghast, at the unexpected revelation of a woman's real heart. Still, she had once seen her friend's deceased husband, and knew he was unhandsome in appearance. Mr. Morice then looked quite middle-aged and

hard-featured, so that it was perhaps unfair to expect over-fond attachment on the part of his young and charming wife. Nevertheless, surely it was a little unkind of Stella to speak in this harsh tone.

Mary was so infrequent a visitor at the Morices' house that she knew next to nothing of their domestic broils. Yet she did know that John Morice at first not only adored his young bride with almost ridiculous pride and admiration, but that he had also fitted up for her a home of great comfort, given her sheltering care, almost unlimited freedom in her calls upon his purse. So the visitor secretly wished that this dear soul, whom she had come to console in affliction, would try to remember only the good qualities of the departed, and not consider herself wronged because he had been a somewhat aged and unsympathetic yokefellow.

But there! there! "Who art thou, O man, that judgest another?" And whenever Mary Dawson caught herself thus weighing a fellow-being in the scales, she had a queer trick, like a child, of saying six times over to herself, in punishment—

“Judge not, that ye be not judged.”

You see, this little woman had led a very lonely life without knowing it; and solitude begets often this close attention to thoughts and speech, with sometimes such nunlike habits of simple penance.

Now she said softly, not to insist longer on the subject of John Morice's death being a loss, or otherwise, to his family—

“At any rate, it must have been a great shock to you, dear.”

“Yes.” Stella's eyes gazed darkly away into space. “All the greater shock that he and I parted in anger. We had a terrible quarrel, and, Mary—I never saw him alive again afterwards.”

Then in a whisper—

“Yesterday, I tried to go into the dining-room downstairs, where he is lying, you know. They have brought his coffin, and I could hear them putting in the screws. But, oh! I could not go in. I waited some time at the door, trying to force myself; then I came away.”

In the house of death, as they were, with its blinds all drawn down to darkness, and a look

of properly shocked mourning on the servants' faces, Mary sympathetically believed she guessed at the full horror of what this meant. Genuine moisture rose in her gentle, narrow-slit eyes. Oh, to think of quarrelling with a dear one and not to have one moment given on earth in which to make it up!

Very consolingly Mary Dawson caressed her friend's hand that lay so white and taper-fingered on the bed, in strong contrast with her own more common-shaped little one. Mary's was a hand red with chilblains and needle-pricked, but a kinder touch never soothed a sick child or brought a warmer sense of fellow-feeling to suffering man or woman.

Stella had not a tear in her dry eyes. On the contrary, her eyeballs felt hot and burning as coals of fire; but she raised herself, and drawing Mary nearer, threw one arm impulsively round the latter's neck and kissed her forehead. With Mrs. Morice this was a rare action towards one of her own sex.

"You are a *good* woman, Mary," she said. "I believe in you; I trust you! Oh, it is an immense comfort to have one friend to turn to

in this weary world. Somehow, I never possessed the knack of making women-friends; I actually have not one but you, and men-friends are not the same as women. Even if they are not in love with one, still, when they marry, they *do* drop you. They always say they will not; but they do. Perhaps, otherwise, their wives would be jealous. I cannot say how it is, but in the end they are lost to one."

Then, sinking back exhausted, but so graceful in her attitude of weariness, that Mary found herself admiring even then those charming movements and outlines of classic grace, Stella went on low and beseechingly—

"Listen, Mary, there is one thing I want you to promise. You are almost alone in the world, the day must come when you will be quite so. There, I do not want to pain you. I am sorry; but you know it is true. Have you thought about it? What I want to know is, what do you mean to do then?"

A foretaste of desolation passed over poor Mary Dawson, like a withering wind that gave her a sense of sickness.

It was quite true, so she acknowledged, as

she sat there a minute or two thinking. Forewarned is forearmed ; and Stella meant kindly in forcing her to look forward to the inevitable.

Yes—too truly that day must come, perhaps soon, when she would waken and feel quite, quite alone in the world. There would be no Darling then to rouse and spoon-feed in the morning, to wash, and dress, and fuss over with loving attentions later. All day long she would sew alone—alone—utterly alone ; with no well-known reclining form on the horsehair sofa, no sympathetic answer always ready in response to whatever foolish chatter might chance to come from her lips ! This was Mary's fond interpretation of the intermittent grunts that were her mother's accompaniment to the daughter's blithesome babble of speech.

Poor Mary's heart felt cold as a lump of ice at the prospect.

Slowly she answered, " True ! that day must come, I fear ; though I do trust and pray it may not be soon."

" Then," said Stella, with suppressed eagerness, " all I ask is your promise that, when it

does happen, you will just come to me. You have told me you have no relations and very few friends; neither have I. Why should we live separated? We always got on so well together at school, and you are fond of my babies."

"Oh, the darlings! indeed, I am; and, of course, also of yourself, dearest Stella. Only it seems so far away; it may not be for some years."

"Ah! years follow each other so quickly—at least, to busy women like yourself. I must try and find some occupation, too," replied Stella, believing herself experienced in the hollowness of life and of the few things which may now and again fill our time with faint pleasure when the fierce quick joy of youth and love is dead. "I will teach my little girls myself; there will be interest in watching their minds developing. Then I shall appoint you their guardian, Mary, in case I die before they grow up. The thought of your promise makes me feel as if something was solid in this unstable world. I believe in your friendship and uprightness; you are a good woman. And

now I shall leave London in a week or two feeling happier."

"Are you going away, then? But where?"

"Anywhere! Anything to get rid of this house and its memories as soon as possible. It is to be sold or let. I am thinking of going abroad for some years."

"Yes, the change will be good for you. But to give up your pretty drawing-room that you arranged so beautifully yourself and were so fond of; you will regret it."

Stella visibly shuddered.

"I never wish to enter it again. It is hateful to me now from its associations. I shall leave you my address at my bankers'; they will always tell you where I am."

"It is a good plan, I think," repeated Mary, sedately, still considering the matter. "The children will learn French and German easily; that is why you have made up your mind to it, I suppose?"

"No;" and Stella gave a mirthless laugh. "I am simply going away because I feel like one who has been fighting with the world. For the present I have had the worst of it. I am

breathless, beaten, and so I am creeping away to rest. But the world has not done with me yet. I am coming back once more to fight it again."

"To fight the world! But how, my dear creature, how?" repeated Mary, bewildered. "What can a woman do, and what would you fight against? I fight in the daily struggle of life for bread; men fight for freedom, faith, greed, ambition; but what is your quarrel with humankind?"

Two bright red spots appeared on Stella's cheeks. Her eyes glowed with dull fire as she answered under her breath, but promptly—

"I hate society with its shams of proprieties and its hypocrisies! Think of the great folk, the men who hold office, and the women of position, who punish the poor for all kinds of sins and misdeeds, and hold up their hands in righteous horror, while they themselves do the *very same thing*—only it is discreetly hidden, you see. They are not brought before police-courts. A costermonger deserts the wretched creature he used to live with, giving her an oath and a pair of black eyes; a gentleman does the same to the woman he has ceased to love,

with a polite bow, that is worse than a blow to her, and gives her a pair of red eyes in secret. She dare not bandage them, or ask sympathy of her friends like any washerwoman. Oh, I hate the world, with its winkings at this and its cloakings of that, and its great commandment, 'Do as you like—only keep it dark.' Faugh, the hypocrisy of it all! Yes, I would rather be openly wicked than a woman Pharisee any day."

"It is a terrible undertaking for one human being, especially a woman, fighting the world; and you ought to be very sure of a good cause," came from Mary, gently but very gravely. "What if you should fail?"

"Then, as the Romans used to cry, 'Væ victis!' Woe to the vanquished!" answered Stella, with a defiant sullenness of look and a harsh ring of tone that Mary Dawson never forgot.

Fighting the world! Would this woman who laid down the challenge be victor or vanquished? In after-years there came a summer's evening when both remembered that word spoken.

Stella's bitter defiance was no idle breath.

Better meet a she-bear robbed of its whelps than such a woman of one first, fierce, overwhelming passion, who has been deserted by her lover.

The hell into which John Morice's mind went down during the last days of his life, through which it may have passed—who knows?—purgatorially cleansed, was not to be compared to the valley of Gehenna in whose fire his wife was tormented.

To have loved, broken her marriage vows, only to be laid aside like a despised doll; to have been on the brink of losing home, husband, children; to have forfeited the world's respect, and yet to have lost the man for whom she had dared all this!—that last well-nigh drove her mad. But it was mostly the world she blamed, the great world of which Middlesex was an honoured leader, to whose laws he was a slave, reared on its starched conventions as on mother's milk. Ah!——

So, with this poison seething in her tortured mind, the unhappy woman went on pursuing the same train of thought aloud, to which Mary listened, yet did not hold the clue.

“The world is so easily outraged at change ; and yet how we have changed our ways, and must, if not always for the better,” went on Stella, with excited voice and eager eyes. “‘The wife of Bath’ rode astride to Canterbury, and no doubt Chaucer considered that a comfortable and natural mode of travelling. Nowadays it is grown immodest. It is the same with dress as with customs ; our eyes and our minds are used to things being done in one way, and at any sign of alteration our sense of nicety takes alarm, and we cry out, ‘Shocking!’ at something in which right and wrong are not really involved.”

“That is very often true,” said Mary. “I sometimes think, what does it matter offending against the mere customs and prejudices of this world for a few years? The generations of human nature pass like crowds of shadows thrown by a magic-lantern on a sheet. One woman acts a little differently from her sisters, and you may imagine all the other shadows in dumb show lifting hands of pious horror. Two hundred years go by—and there are her great-grand-daughters and all their friends acting

exactly as she did. Poor soul ! if she had only been born a little later, she would have set the fashion, and they would all have been running to ask her to their parties."

"You say that! You agree!" interrupted Stella, looking at her with strange fixity. "Yes, if we could only put Mrs. Grundy's ideas aside, and get at the eternal laws of right and wrong. For the last three nights I have lain awake till daylight thinking of it all ; one can think so much better in the darkness when all is quiet, except that the thoughts go whirling round in my brain, like wheels everlastingly turning in a machine that no one can stop. Well, take morality for instance, is not that a matter of climate and of different ages of the world? The Hebrews of old, and the Mahommedans and Hindoos and others nowadays, can have their many wives ; Christians may not. Where are the eternal laws of right and wrong there? What is pious among the savages of South America may be sin amongst the Red Indians of the north. In the beginning it is all a matter of necessity, and perhaps in another hundred

years all our ways and marriage laws may be altered, too. Oh, Mary, believe me, it is a crime, it is unspeakable wickedness, to chain a girl, as I was, in marriage for life—for life, mind you!—to an elderly man like my husband, whom I had only seen a few times, whom I did not know, understand; who had nothing in sympathy with me. My mother told me there were too many girls in the world, and, therefore, it is actually impossible to get all of them married, so that when the chance came, it was too lucky to be thrown aside. Now, I sometimes wonder if the Chinese are wrong, who are said to expose their surplus female children to death, drowning them or killing them somehow. Better that than the misery of hundreds of girls starving for bread, starving for love, fighting for work in the crowd with men who are stronger and trying to hustle them out of the way—except the very few who are generous-minded. Not that I blame the other men who want their happiness, too; if they are younger sons and poor in our overstocked markets. One must be just. But I hate the rich few who are made rich at the

expense of the poorer many, and are still full of greed and avarice. And I ask *why* should men's morality be so much lower than ours? why, when in all else they consider themselves so much stronger and wiser, our masters, teachers, and priests? And then, if a woman unhappily married does love some one with all her heart and soul, religious folk call her wicked, while it is only human nature. Oh, I—I—I am honest—only you do not understand;" and Stella turned, and flinging her arms out, buried her face in the pillows with choking, but tearless sobs.

"Not wicked; no one dare do that. But it would be her cross, and she should bear it. As to men, let them see to themselves. At least a man reared by a good mother starts with a happy beginning in life. Faith in womanhood beats in his blood."

All the while Mary was asking herself with inner wonderment, "Does Stella expect to have *everything* good on earth? She has her two dear little children; health and youth; an assured income. Dear me! that is a very great deal."

But her friend thought differently.

“Why should such things be?” again asked Stella, raising her head a moment. “*Why* are we allowed to be born, if we are condemned to suffering, or else to sin; if there is no other choice given us?”

“Hush, hush, dear!” said Mary, grieved; “there is a suffering, I think (indeed, I have known it myself), out of which one comes feeling stronger and even glad, but it is not a gladness I can explain, just as in this great puzzle you speak of about pain and sin in the world, I can only feel and believe it will all come right somehow, although it is impossible for one’s human mind to solve. When I am in difficulty of mind I go to my Bible. If one part does not seem to give me an answer, I try another and then another page, but I always do find it, and it cheers me with courage and comfort again.”

There was silence for a while; then Stella asked in an abrupt whisper—

“Mary, do tell me. How was it you never married? You would be such a devoted wife.”

Poor Mary reddened.

“I was engaged once,” she said gently.

“He was a soldier, and going to India. But my dear one at home was beginning to be ill, so I could not leave her. And after a time he got tired of waiting and married some one else. That is all.”

“All ! Everything,” commented Stella, bitterly, “in this life.”

“I look for another life, and can wait,” smiled Mary.

Later on, when Mary Dawson had betaken herself home to the attic sitting-room, and the canary and the still figure on the sofa, Stella felt her luxurious chamber empty and solitary since that bright little presence and cheery voice had vanished into the street.

“When I have her altogether to live with me, I shall not feel alone,” she murmured to herself. “It is terrible to feel alone, to feel one’s soul alone—that no other living being knows or cares what is passing in one’s mind.”

She did not realize that well-nigh every soul on earth is solitary. The knowledge comes to most of us sooner or later with a shock. We imagine it is only our own selves who feel so,

that others are happier and enjoying companionship of mind as of body, all their thoughts shared as well as joys, sorrows, and hopes. Some few may be so blessed ; but how few !

Remembering what Mary had advised about reading her Bible, Stella, almost to her own surprise, presently rose. She felt dizzy and weak as she stood upright, but began to search about the room.

“ I used to have one, somewhere,” she said to herself. “ Where can it have got to ? I looked at it several times when I was reading those books downstairs in the drawing-room, to compare what each said. Ah, here it is.”

It was a Bible she had used as a little girl, a thick volume with crabbed small print and many marginal notes.

Opening it at random, Stella's eyes only fell on the wars of Joshua against various cities and tribes which he laid waste, so that no soul that breathed therein was left alive.

“ What cruel massacre ! ” thought the woman of our sensitive century. It did not occur to her that these tribal records were of an early age, the Jewish leader's stern chastisal of

idolatry and polytheism being the primitive idea of godliness.

Again she opened the book at a psalm full of gladness and thanksgiving, to which her sick heart could not attune itself.

Turning over the pages with a disappointed feeling, at last her attention was arrested. Stella read—started with a wounded cry, covering her face with her hands.

“Not that! not that!” she murmured to herself. “Can it be a warning?” For her eyes had lighted on a terrible description, in the plain strong words used by our forefathers in translating that book into a tongue “understood of the people.”

She had read of a wicked woman, such an one as deceived her husband and wrought shame in Israel, and who yet ate and drank and wiped her mouth with her hand, asking herself, “What evil have I done?”

With a strong shudder, Stella pushed the book away from her sight, and tried to banish the words of the teacher as quickly as possible from her mind.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

“Ne she was darke ne browne, but bright,
And cleare as the moone light;
Againe whom all the starres semen
But small candles as we demen.”

Romaunt of the Rose.

SEVERAL years have passed by since this brief tale opened. Few years and short, looking backward; looking forward in those past days, how long a stretch of time they had seemed!

Spring was come tripping along the banks of the Thames, scattering flowers everywhere on trees and bushes, on earth and even water. The river was flowing brown and swollen to the very edge of its banks with rapid, swirling current, for there had fallen heavy rains of late. It was a fresh day, with cool, slight breezes, and shy sunlight glancing every now and again past fleecy shower-clouds, and shining

all the more sweetly for its elusive fickleness on the tender green of the wooded slopes and the aspens a-quiver by the water's brim.

Away on the upper reaches of the Thames, at a place where the weir-current turned sharply to the left, lay a little red-brick house in the coign between the said weir and its parent stream.

This was an unpretentious but charming cottage, all mantled with creepers, roses, and wistaria to its many small gables. Its windows shone bright with glittering panes, the door-steps were snowy white, and beds of anemones, jonquils, narcissus, and such-like early garden flowers lay below its cosy walls glowing on a velvet lawn. Lilac bushes hung in masses of fragrance and harmonious colour, taller laburnums above these dropped chains of gold; all around the air was full of birds' songs, the cawing of rooks, and, heard more faintly in the distance from green meadows, the bleating of lambs.

The cottage lay a short distance back from the river, while its grounds, as was said before, occupied the angle between the Thames and

the weir-stream, at the apex of which angle was fixed a board with the warning signal, "Danger." Down the weir-current, where no boat ever adventured itself, the banks were charming and sequestered. Willows and alders spread their branches, overhanging the bank, and almost dipping into the rushing water. Between their clumps of foliage were breaks of greensward to the river's brink, tiny lawns, never desecrated by noisy boat-crews, making the silence ring with cockney vulgarity of merriment, and disfiguring the sylvan scene with scraps of newspaper, empty bottles, and the remains of luncheon. Here the loosestrife grew high and purple by the bank, and across yonder, where the current flowed less strongly, in that shallow curve of the reed-grown island, the water-lilies laid out their leaves to sun on the surface, thick as thick could be, while no rude hands tore away their brave show of white lily cups, expanding to the blue heaven above, in snowy-petalled chalices that seemed offering their hearts of gold.

It was afternoon. The little house, by name "Willow Lea," lay still, as if empty. Not

an inmate was in view on its garden lawn or at the windows; most likely maids were busy within-doors, its owners gone out an airing. Further away, in a more secluded part of the grounds by the river, near where the water poured in a white swirl over the weir with never-ending hoarse murmur of haste and rejoicing, were the only living creatures visible, excepting birds, insects, and an occasional leaping fish. The one was a young girl bending anxiously through some parted willow branches over the water. The other was a fluffy white kitten, with a pink ribbon round its neck, that was clinging desperately to a willow branch stretching several feet out from the bank.

The branch dipped with every motion of the tiny, terrified creature, which had evidently crept out too far, and could not turn to come back again. The poor kitten mewed piteously as it rocked, and caught a more tenacious grasp of the slender bough with its tiny claws.

“What *shall* I do? Oh, kitty! kitty! why did you go so far? Can’t you come back, darling?” cried the girl, wringing helpless soft hands.

Looking at her there, the exclamation of a spectator would most probably be, "How like an old picture!" She was more like one of Gainsborough's or Reynolds's wasp-waisted and ethereal creations stepped down out of an antiquated frame, than an everyday specimen of our English, well-grown, well-formed young womanhood, that is generally rosy-cheeked and strong-limbed nowadays. This one was a slight slip of a creature, little more than sixteen years of age. She was so tall and thin that she had plainly shot up too fast out of childhood; and as she anxiously held apart the willow branches, her figure was not unlike them in its slenderness, suppleness, and also weakness. It was her face, however, that was unusual; the small head upraised on the long curved neck; dark hair piled in luxuriant masses, escaping in stray curls and tangles from under the wide straw hat, and a soft pale visage, of which at first glance one could rightly discern no features but the eyes, attention being caught and held fast by their wondering bigness. She looked a being reared in moonbeams and in shadows; dew and starlight

and faint breezes had surely combined to nourish her growth, like those faint blossoms which unfold only at night.

“Oh, what is to be done?” repeated this young creature helplessly to herself. Then, raising her voice in a long, quivering cry, she called, “Su—san! Mary! Help, help!”

But there was no answering voice; no black-gowned, white-capped figure came running adown the trim lawn or through the shrubbery. The house was dumb.

“Help! oh, help! Hi—i!” again she cried.

At that, listening, she heard an unexpected halloa sounding from the paddock beyond the weir, where was no cottage, nor high-road, nor likelihood of succour.

Waiting, astonished, she presently saw an unknown man’s figure come crashing through the intervening straggling hedge.

“Halloa!” he shouted, hastening forward to the rescue. “All right!—What is the matter?”

The man stopped short, breathing somewhat hard after his run, for, though spare and active, he was in his forties.

Then, as the girl stepped out from among the bushes face to face with him, he stood surprised, in truth taken aback at the fair vision.

She was only aware with quick feminine intuition that this was a gentleman; also that he was a strikingly handsome man, with high-bred, delicate features and piercingly bright, dark eyes.

"Oh, sir, can you help me? It is my kitten. See!" she implored, with parted quivering lips, her young face white as her pale cotton gown, her eyes brimful of entreaty.

"I see."

The stranger took in the situation at a glance, suppressed a dawning smile of relief, and assumed an expression of concern and interest.

"It crept out there after a willow-wren a few minutes ago, and the poor little thing can't get back," she rapidly explained, with anxiety and hope flitting across her face in alternate light and shadow. "As long as I speak to it it stays still, but if I went back to the house for help it might get more frightened and so

fall in. Then the water is so deep, and the current so strong here, that you see it would be washed over the weir." She broke off short with a prolonged distressful "*O—h!*"

The kitten had slipped one paw on the treacherous bark, and, in an agonized attempt to regain the lost hold, caused its bough to swing perilously, dipping even into the water.

"It will be drowned! I must save it!" The girl made an impulsive dash forwards.

She was caught as quickly and held back by the stranger, who said, in a tone that impressed her, even through her fright, as of one accustomed to command, and who had the inborn right to be obeyed by all those less prompt of resource and skill than himself in the great or small vicissitudes of life—

"Do not attempt to go into the water. You will be drowned next, both you and the poor kitten; and of what use would that be?"

"I meant to hold by those branches overhead, and, if you will give me your hand, indeed I think I could do it."

The unknown uttered a short laugh, for the arm he still kept in his detaining grasp was

little stronger than a mere wand. Why, he could have broken it easily with one twist of his wrist.

"If either of us two goes in, I do," he briefly decided. "But your weir-stream runs so strong to-day it might even drown me and not save your favourite. *Cui bono?* We must invent some other plan. Let us see."

"Yes! Oh, do think! Quick, please!"

"Do not alarm yourself. That kitten can hold on a good half-hour longer. I am thinking."

The new-comer was truly trying to do so, but the witching child-face upturned in breathless expectancy of gaze to his own, hanging on every word which fell from his lips, disturbed his cool judgment.

The girl's hat had been caught just now by the willow twigs in her impetuous effort at succour. She pulled it impatiently off her head and flung it on the grass. A faint admiring smile curved her companion's lips on seeing now a rebellious brown aureole of hair framing her face some inches deep, while further back it was twisted on the top of her

little head in a bewildering tangle of knots and curls. Her eyes thrilled through him, who was peculiarly sensitive to such emotions, with a strange, almost painful, sensation. They were great eyes like blue lamps, dark lashed and browed, lighting up the velvety pale, still somewhat unformed face, and they were wide with beseeching appeal as those of a child, yet with a subtle fascination in their inmost depths that betrayed womanhood.

Even while dispassionately but admiringly criticizing her novel style of unripe yet tempting beauty, the man was searching his own mind honestly how best to give help.

“Have you got a landing-net, by any chance?” he suddenly asked.

“Yes, there is one somewhere, if I can find it. My sister and I fish sometimes.”

Away darted the young thing from his side, flitting like a latter-day dryad or nymph of some kind, whether of woodland or wold.

Meanwhile her friend in need followed after her with quick, decided step, looking about him in keen scrutiny.

“There must be a boat-house near here, and

an oar or pole of some kind would come in handy," he murmured to himself, stroking his moustache. "If my young white witch had not been in such a deuce of a hurry, she might have told me where to look. Now, if it is too late, she will blame me."

Emerging from the wood, he came on what suited his purpose—a daisy-rake that had been left lying on the grass by the gardener. He took it up, and was turning back again when the girl came flying down from the house, carrying her landing-net. She was flushed now and panting hard, with one hand pressed to her side.

"There, there! we need not hurry so. You have been running too fast; you will hurt yourself some day if you do that, my——" The stranger was about to say, naturally, "dear child," but checked himself remembering the dignity attached to girlhood's first long skirts and hair fastened up with hair-pins, so he courteously substituted, "my little lady."

He had a charming manner. It was gallant, implied homage, yet at the same time had the slight tone of masculine authority with which

he had before checked her mad impulse to jump into the water.

She slackened her footsteps, to his surprise, with the submissiveness of a child, even while urging and beseeching him with her whole speaking face that both of them should hasten onward.

“Indeed, running does not hurt me—not much. *Please, oh, please* let us hurry! Kitty knows my voice. She will miss me. Ah! there she is still; and look, look! see those horrid birds!”

A singular scene was taking place down among the willows.

Whish! whirr! A flock of small birds were dashing around the luckless kitten in twittering flight backwards and forwards. Then, apparently emboldened by the absence of human beings, and enjoying the helpless plight of their foe, they perched closely round the latter on the willow twigs above and below, chirping sharply—with jeers and taunts, as could hardly be doubted.

“They are mocking my poor kitty! they are tormenting and persecuting her!” indignantly declared the girl in a petted tone.

Her unknown knight laughed indulgently, and began to banter this distressed damsel as they neared pussy's pillory. In his ears her wrath was a mimicry of childishness; an infantile affectation assumed for his masculine benefit. It was a compliment that the young play-actress should thus try to attract him; and at her age the little wile was pretty enough; in a few years it would be ridiculous.

But he was mistaken, for she was perfectly natural in her small display of injury. She was simply a trifle spoilt, and habit, as we know, is second nature.

CHAPTER II.

“Like a fawn dost thou fly from me, Chloë,
Like a fawn that, astray on the hill-tops,
Her shy mother misses and seeks,
Vaguely scared by the breeze and the forest.”

Now both set about the work of rescue. The daisy-rake was pushed out temptingly till it reached kitty, the latter's young mistress insisting on holding it herself. The kitten hazarded a trembling paw, half clung to the friendly succour, and—oh, terror!—all but slipped off again into the water; for the girl's arms being weak, she dipped the heavy rake. Next instant, her companion promptly used the landing-net in succour, and brought the little creature to the bank, dripping and terrified, but safe.

The girl caught it up in her arms, hugging and covering it with kisses.

“How can I thank you enough? I don't know what I should have done if kitty had

been drowned. Little pet! it is my constant companion. She plays with me all day, and will follow me through the grounds for an hour at a time. Kitty, I believe we were made for each other, don't you? and the world for us both?"

"Are you so much alone, then, that you have no other companion?" asked the stranger, watching the transports of both kittens, the animated ball of fat and fur, and the graceful young human creature, with an admiring but slightly mocking smile. This, considering his years, and that he was no longer a youth ready to fall down and worship every pretty maiden he meets as he wanders first out into the world, was natural enough.

"Yes; I have my sister. She is a little older than I am, but we are like twins together. And an aunt, too; only they are both gone off this afternoon, visiting the almshouses, as usual, or a man in consumption in the village, or the school. I dislike all that. I am very wicked. I don't like poor people, just because they *are* poor; and sick ones give me a kind of shudder all over—unless they are persons I am fond of. Isn't it horrid of me?"

Then with a sudden change from delicate disgust, expressed in the funny wrinkling of her little nose, contradicted by laughing eyes, to a tone of genuine concern, almost dismay—

“Oh, you have cut your hand! See, it is bleeding; it is covered with blood.”

The man looked down at his wrist. “A mere scratch. I remember now, I cut myself when jumping through that hedge. There is a cruel barbed wire. It does not signify. There—I will wash it in the stream.”

“I wish I might ask you up to the house to give you some warm water and to bind it up,” said the girl wistfully, full of regret that she could not show gratitude as she wished, though all the play of her features expressed sympathy and friendliness. “I should so much like to offer you a little hospitality after your kindness, only we are not allowed to have any visitors.”

“Have you a stern father, then?” he lightly asked, while kneeling down on the edge of the bank and washing the deep though small cut as best he could.

“No, our father is dead long ago. We have

only our mother left, and she is not stern, but is very strict about my sister and myself, so we are not allowed to ask any one to the house in her absence."

"She is away now, then, I presume? Well, I am sorry at not being able to pursue further so charming an acquaintanceship. However, as a soldier, I learnt long ago that orders must be obeyed, so the best thing I can do is to take my departure."

While speaking, the visitor was fumbling with a handkerchief, in a futile attempt to cover up his wound.

"Let me tie it for you. Yes, please, may I do something to help?" entreated the young girl, eagerly. "Allow me to give you my handkerchief; yours is too large. There! see!" and she neatly bound up his wrist with a fine lace-edged morsel of cambric embroidered with a pansy in shades of violet silk.

"What a pretty mark! What does it mean?" commented her amused patient.

"It is my name, 'Pansy'—Pansy Dean," she said, with the engaging frankness of a child, that was one of this young nymph's chief charms.

"The name suits you. From the French *pensée*, and yet Heart's-ease?—I hardly know," mused the man softly, in a voice that thrilled through the pretty, foolish being upon whom his brilliant dark hazel eyes were fixed in a considering gaze.

"May I keep this in remembrance of our chance meeting? Who knows whether Fate may ever allow our paths in life to cross each other again?"

Pansy dropped her own lovely limpid eyes downwards, their black lashes lying in a deep fringe on her cheek. A blush, swift to come and go as a rosy, summer lightning streak, passed over her face; then she shyly, gradually raised her lustrous orbs towards the handsome countenance above her in returning confidence.

"You may keep it," she breathed lightly rather than spoke. "But, oh, I do hope—I mean, I should be sorry if we never met again."

"Will you, at least, walk as far with me as the green lane through the wood yonder, beyond your meadow?" asked the stranger, in the same musical voice which Pansy secretly

wondered she had not noticed at first, it was so pleasant in her ears.

His manner was charming ; it was full of deference, yet with suppressed admiration breathing through it, betrayed in every eloquent look and courteous gesture.

With inborn coquetry the child-maiden hesitated, half consented, almost drew back ; then, still reluctant but altogether charming, led her visitor by a winding path through the copse.

Unconsciously their steps lingered as they went ; strayed here and there to admire the vista of white, hoarsely falling weir-water seen through the fresh beech branches ; occasionally stayed altogether. Somehow—whether owing to the spring air that sent the blood of both dancing quicker through their veins, even the man's pulses beating again with some of the old quick gladness of youth, or perhaps simply because chance had brought them suddenly together, they two only in this sylvan scene—somehow, from whatever hidden cause, their thoughts went more lightly, trippingly than their feet. Was it ten minutes—twenty—that they took to pass through the beech grove

with its silvered tree-stems, and long layered branches of freshest green, through which the sunlight slanted, falling in bright flecks here and there on the girl's slender white figure?

Pansy prattled on with the most engaging openness. Could the man help it, that, without meaning to take advantage of her youthful candour, he was interested—and looked it? So, listening to the fresh young voice, he soon learned something of the life led in the cottage set in these secluded grounds, called Willow Lea.

Two young girls brought up under strict surveillance evidently—that of an aunt in the house, kind, but apparently prim, keeping them punctually to lessons, offering the diversions of good works, school-feasts, and walks to study botany. Then an affectionate she-dragon of a mother, so he interpreted Pansy's ardent yet awed allusions to the latter, who was absent in town almost all the week long, only coming to see her children from Saturdays till Mondays.

“Mother cannot help it; she has her business in London, you see. She often wishes she could get down more to us, but she can't,”

vaguely explained Pansy, as their steps brushed sedately through the lush grass of the paddock by the side of the flowering hawthorn hedge.

“Business!—that is rather unusual for a woman,” was all her companion allowed himself to remark, with a slight lifting of his eye brows by way of interrogation.

The water-sprite at his side laughed in mischievous glee.

“I know what you are thinking ; yes, I am sure of it. You believe she is a lady dress-maker or a milliner, don't you ? That is quite fashionable, mother tells us, only you are wrong this time. No ; she has other business—I really hardly know what—for she says we would not understand it, but it has to do with stocks and shares, and buying in and selling out, I know. Oh, our mother is immensely clever, and such a dear !”

“But have you no amusements ? no companions of your own age ? no parties ?”

Pansy threw out her little hands with an eloquent gesture.

“Friends ! parties ! None ! We are not

allowed any. Oh, we hire a pony-cart when we please, and we garden and sketch. Then we may row as much as we like. We have a punt, a double canoe, and all manner of boats. I have a sweet little one that is my very own."

"Shall you come out soon? I am staying with friends two or three miles upstream for a few days, and there is just a chance I might meet you on the river."

The stranger's voice was studiously indifferent, but his eyes dwelt with an earnest, keen glance on Pansy's fascinating pale face, with its love-maze of brown, bewildering tresses.

Pansy turned shy, not knowing why. "The current is so strong," she murmured, a second blush staining the velvety pallor of her cheeks, while she turned her head aside on that long slender throat, which had such an antelope curve.

Had she seemed willing at first, he might not have cared to pursue his wish; but the natural instinct inherent in manhood—the same that makes a boy bent on the capture of a fluttering butterfly—the love of chase, sprang up within him strong, never resisted.

He drew a little nearer, his voice becoming dangerously low and vibrant.

“The day after to-morrow? The river may be safe then.”

As if attracted against her will, Pansy slowly looked round once more. Her eyes raised themselves almost reluctantly to those of her neighbour; were held fast by the spell of attraction in his dark glowing ones. She hesitated; did not speak; only drank that eloquent gaze into the transparent depth of her own sapphire “windows of the soul.” Mutely she moved on towards the paddock-gate leading into the wood beyond. Here ran a grassy lane that met the high-road.

The stranger stopped, and held out his hand in farewell.

“The day after to-morrow,” he repeated, almost in a whisper. “Towards three o’clock.”

Pansy left her hand a moment or two in his clasp, and gave him one lovely wondering look—a look of beguilement; for it might mean, “Shall I?” the hesitation of a coquette balancing lightly the question; or the self-inquiry of the newborn maiden, “What manner of tryst is this to which I am bidden?”

Then she turned, and, almost before he knew it, was gone, running lightly like a sylph, as if one motion was as natural to her as another.

He watched her flitting back under the green shadow of the hedge, to his mind like a summer cloud passing before the breeze, while the white kitten gambolled after her, leaping through the grass.

“She will come,” he said to himself, with a peculiar smile, pleased, yet with a tinge of bitterness. Then—“What a little flirt!”

CHAPTER III.

“Two lovely berries moulded on one stem.”

IF it was indeed a cage for two young birds, Willow Lea was, at least, a prettily gilded one, with fresh green leaves twined in its bars. And the nest of this cage, its downiest nook, was the schoolroom. Here history-books and globes mingled in friendly companionship with walls bright with good water-colours, flowering plants, and a whole aviary of canaries, siskins, and waxbills. These kept a noonday silence just now, only broken by whispered chirps, as if they had been told it was working-time.

Two sisters were busied at a similar task ; a pair of virgin heads bent, now separately, now at the same moment, over two copies of a water-colour drawing placed before them.

There the resemblance ended.

Rose, the elder girl, was plodding diligently

at her sketch, yet with a sober air of doubt as to its ultimate success dimming the usual cheerfulness of her face. She was a fresh, fair girl, sweet-faced and rosy, hardly pretty, yet pleasant to look upon in her comeliness of youth and health.

Opposite her sister, Pansy was leaning back languidly in her chair, thinking. She might have sat for the Muse of Poetry, her thoughts were roaming so far afield. Then the mood passed like a wind-blown cloud, and, seizing a down-dropped brush, her slim fingers seemed full of life and vigour as, in few but decided strokes, she dashed in a vivid impression of the landscape, contrasting strongly with her sister's careful correctness.

Pansy's sketch was full of atmosphere and light; even more, it had a touch of genius.

"There!" she exclaimed at last, dropping in her chair, a pale, soft thing, with all the power gone out of her—"there! I am sick of painting. I won't touch a brush again this morning."

"Why, you began later than I did, and yet your sketch is lovely. Look at mine; it is not nearly finished yet. I do not know what to do

to it. It is as stiff as a coloured map," sighed Rose, in good-humoured, despairing envy.

The younger girl rose and bent criticisingly over her sister's easel.

"I think I can see what is wrong. Just let me try and touch it up a little," she softly remarked, forgetting her late declaration, and pushing Rose aside with gentle insistence.

In a few moments the laboured landscape, under Pansy's fingers, took a different aspect. It had received those few subtle changes which are like the soul breathed into the mere body made of the dust of the ground.

Rose was meanwhile profuse in thanks and praise of Pansy's superior talent.

The wholesome-minded but slightly dull elder sister had a fervent admiration for her junior, believing that no one in the wide world was so lovely, so sweetly unselfish, so full of charming caprice and airy delightsomeness, as this young creature, who was equally worshipped by all in the cottage.

"Now Mr. Huxtable will not give three nods in his terrible way, like a decrepit Jove, or praise my mountain sarcastically as a fine hay-

cock," she said, satisfied, being in much awe of their aged drawing-master.

"Cross-patch may be pleased or not; I don't care," announced Pansy, with perfect indifference, seizing on her easel, and disposing it in the background with one swift movement like the swoop of a bird.

"How do you manage him?" put in Rose. "He always grumbles at me, but he never says a word to you."

"*I look at him!*" was the calm announcement. "He gets hot, and stammers, and then says, in a meek voice like an old sheep, that my sketch is 'fair—very fair indeed,' even when I know it is only a dash of paint and a promise."

"Pansy!" said Rose, properly shocked, "how can you speak so? You do not mean to tell me you make eyes at that old man?"

"Why not?" returned her model fellow-pupil as coolly, transparently innocent of aught that could offend as a block of pure ice.

"Well, it is not a way that——" began Rose like a dear prude. "That is very nice" was on her lips; but, shocked at her own severity, she

broke off short, hesitated, and substituted, "that auntie would quite approve, of getting in his good graces. I always rise or fall honestly by my work."

"But," persisted Pansy with incorrigible calm, "what *harm* is there in smiling at him? Let auntie tell me that! She always says, 'Don't do this or that;' but never tells us why. I advise you to try. It is very easy, and one gets one's own way."

No! Auntie never did explain the by-laws of polite conduct to this child of nature, being sadly hampered by certain restrictions laid upon her in the upbringing of her charges. She felt this especially unfortunate, as Pansy was passing through the "Why not?" phase of girlhood, that is the *Sturm und Drang* period of feminine nature. The household-spoilt darling was naughty enough to enjoy the discomfiture which her bright questioning spirit caused their staid little guardian; often she persevered out of pure mischief.

"Come out and have a game of tennis," proposed Rose now, who was secretly discomposed that the second Miss Dean would not

accept the results of their elders' experience as she herself submissively did.

Pansy languidly stretched herself, smiled, and roused up. Presently the tennis-ground outside was ringing with the fresh laughter, calls, and cries of both as they sent a flying ball backwards and forwards.

Their young figures would have been charming to watch, as they darted hither and thither with eager forward rushes, quick strokes, then desperate retreats, mostly in vain. But there was no spectator to the pretty scene. There never was any. Willow Lea was as secluded from the outer world as a convent.

"That was a splendid game. Let us have just one more now for practice!" cried Rose, after half an hour. She was the better player of the two sisters.

A few minutes later, however, her fresh voice sounded again in rather disappointed reproach.

"Why, you are not trying to play up, Pansy! This is a love-game. There, I have won!"

Swinging her victorious racket, the winner was walking away with a triumphant smile, when she all at once noticed that Pansy was standing

as if transfixed with pain, one hand pressed against her heart.

“Oh, my dear, what is it? Have you got one of your attacks?” cried Rose, hastening to her sister’s help in alarm. “There! lean on me. I made you play too long. How stupid of me!”

“It is nothing; only some palpitation,” murmured Pansy, whose face was colourless for the moment, save for her blue eyes wide with pain.

Next moment a plump little woman appeared through the French window of the cottage drawing-room, and came running as fast as she could down the grassy slope of lawn. Whoever has seen a bantam hen come fluttering to the succour of a chick in danger, can most nearly imagine the hurrying figure. With motherly care she supported the suffering girl in her arms, while an earthy-handed gardener appeared at her cries of, “George!” Between them these two carried Pansy into a tent close by on the lawn. Rose, who had meanwhile hurried to the house, returned with restoratives; and the gardener was sent shambling off in an ungainly trot for the doctor.

Even as she sipped some water, the sufferer's eyes gazed after his disappearing figure with a gleam of reviving fun.

"Look at him! look! like a two-legged bear," she whispered with a weak laugh.

"Oh, child, you are getting better. But be quiet now," chid Mary Dawson.

She was none other indeed. Our old friend, little changed, but for some grey streaks in her smooth hair, more plumpness of person, besides a general air of well-being specially expressed in so pretty and well-fitting a gown, that in former days she would not have dared aspire to wearing such an one on Easter Sunday.

Presently the village doctor arrived—a shrewd, ruddy-faced neighbour, and father of a family, who came even more quickly across the close-cut sward than was his usual brisk gait. He shook his head severely at the sufferer.

"Come, come, this won't do. I must give you a scolding, young lady. You've been naughty and skipping too much. *What* am I always telling you? Forgot it—eh?"

Pansy softly stole a fragile white hand into his strong fist.

The doctor raised the little hand, kissed it, and said no more in reproach. Instead, he consoled the anxieties of Mary Dawson and Rose even while admonishing his pet patient.

“You see, my dear child, because you have had these attacks from infancy, you have grown careless. Why not try some quieter amusements?”

“Ah, you are pleasing auntie! See her smiling!” retorted Pansy, mischievously. “Fancy! last time I was taken ill, she wanted me to teach in the Sunday school by way of diversion.”

“Now, Rose, I appeal to you. I only said the children were sometimes most diverting,” cried Mary, in self-defence.

“Yes,” said Rose, downrightly. “That time you asked them how were the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed, and they said, ‘With brimstone and treacle.’”

Doctor Potts joined the two fair rebels in laughter. Mary Dawson bridled slightly, but smiled despite herself. It was pleasant to see the little woman vainly pretending that she did not enjoy their banter. Often both girls

would seize on her as a handy victim for bodily tortures of ticklings and huggings that did her heart good, though she was fain to cry for mercy. Mary had only known what it was to give love and sympathy to the sick or sinful in her former life. Now it was sweet to her womanly soul to be loved and coaxed and teased by these young things, and to have no daily load on her mind, no fears for the future. She was, in truth, very happy.

“What a pretty scene!” thought the doctor. His gaze took in the shady tent, its interior bright with Syrian rugs and an Oriental divan on which Pansy lay, still pale as a creature shaped out of a white cloud, but with sunshine lighting the depths of her big eyes. Outside there was a vista through May-trees laden with milk-white blossom, of velvet turf, bright flowers, and the charming cottage in the background.

“Willow Lea is a paradise,” he said aloud, “and you are three Eves. Pain ought no more to enter here than sin. Well, well—— And, by the way, Miss Rose, though Adam is so rigorously excluded from this garden, I must

congratulate you on a conquest in the rectory one the other day. A—h! What do I mean? Why, the complete way you captivated the son of the house, Frank Vyner. They say he has come back from Australia for a wife, and all our young women are setting their caps straight. The rector is very proud of Frank, who has worked hard out there these five years, and had good luck. And I must say he is a fine specimen of a manly young Englishman.”

With which the doctor picked up his hat and stalked away, Mary Dawson’s buxom figure trotting in his company to the gate.

END OF VOL. I.



TELEGRAMS:
ASSIDUOUS, LONDON.

15, CRAVEN STREET, STRAND,
LONDON, W.C.

1894.

A CATALOGUE
OF
NEW BOOKS
AND
NEW EDITIONS

Published by

BLISS,
SANDS,
AND FOSTER.



*To be obtained
of all booksellers,
and at all libraries;
or of the publishers,
post-free on remit-
tance of the pub-
lished price.*

FICTION.

New Library Novels.—

A LIFE AWRY.

"Clever skilfully worked out."—*Standard*.

"A novel full of thought, power, pathos, and beauty. . . .
A novel of remarkable loftiness and beauty."—*Daily Chronicle*.

"A realistic novel. . . . One of the most beautiful
pieces of prose we have read in fiction for a very long time."
—*Morning Leader*.

"Talented clever. . . . The book is a pleasure
to see as well as to read."—*Vanity Fair*.

By PERCIVAL PICKERING. *In* 3 Vols.

Dr. GREY'S PATIENT.

"Mrs. Reaney writes pleasantly, and these volumes of hers
are very readable."—*St. James's Gazette*.

Miss Willard says:—

"Far above the ordinary level of the three-volume novel
. . . . nothing less than a human document."

"Mrs. Reaney is certainly to be congratulated."—*Review of
Reviews*.

By Mrs. G. S. REANEY. *In* 3 Vols.

IN AN ORCHARD.

By Mrs. MACQUOID.

In 2 Vols.

Author of "Patty"; "The Red Glove," etc.

DUST BEFORE THE WIND.

ANONYMOUS.

In 2 Vols.

FICTION—*continued.*

Cloth, Gilt Top, 2s.

"Autumn Leaf" Tinted Hand-made
Paper, 1s. 6d.THE
MODERN
LIBRARY."Charming pocket series."—*Globe.*"Charming volumes."—*Maxwell Gray.*"Its binding, size, paper, and all other adjuncts are
charming."—*Athenæum.*

1.—A LATTER DAY ROMANCE.

BY MRS. MURRAY HICKSON.

"A very pleasant little story."—*Literary World.*"Dramatic power and artistic finish. . . . The book is good literature. It possesses distinction of style, force of expression, and quickness of insight, and is thoroughly interesting."—*Speaker.*

2.—THE WORLD'S PLEASURES.

BY CLARA SAVILE-CLARKE.

"Forcible and fearless, while never overstepping the bounds of delicacy and decorum."—*Daily Telegraph.*"The book is cleverly written."—*Queen.*

3.—A NAUGHTY GIRL.

BY J. ASHBY STERRY.

[Just Published.]

4.—"HEAVENS!"

BY ALOIS VOJTECH SMILOVSKY.

A Bohemian Novel, translated from the Czech by Professor MOUREK, of
Prague University, and JANE MOUREK.

[Just Ready.]

5.—A CONSUL'S PASSENGER.

BY HARRY LANDER.

(AND OTHER VOLUMES IN PREPARATION).

FICTION—*continued.**One Volume Novels.***INSCRUTABLE.***By* ESME STUART. Cr. 8vo. 3s. 6d.

THE STORY OF MY DICTATORSHIP.ANONYMOUS. Cr. 8vo. 3s. 6d.

VICTIMS.*By* F. W. MAUDE. Cr. 8vo. 6s.

A MERCIFUL DIVORCE.*By* F. W. MAUDE. New Edition. Cr. 8vo. Cloth
extra. 2s.

MISCELLANEOUS.

TWO WORKS BY FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD, LL.D.,
Formerly U. S. Consul at Glasgow, and now at Edinburgh.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL: a Monograph entitled, *The Poet and the Man.*—By FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD, LL.D. Crown 8vo, olive buckram, gilt top, 4s. 6d.

"Interesting touches of reminiscence and appreciation of Lowell and his contemporaries."—*Times*.

QUABBIN: *The Story of a Small Town, with Outlooks upon Puritan Life.*—By FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD, LL.D. Numerous Illustrations. Large cr. 8vo, gilt top. 7s. 6d.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES says, in a letter to the Author:—"Dipping into it I became interested, and the more I read the more I was pleased, and so read on until I had taken every chapter, every sentence, every word, and the three notes of the appendix—lapped them up as a kitten laps up a saucer of cream."

The *Athenæum* says:—"His story is exceedingly well written, and is extremely interesting. . . . He has written a most interesting book, in which there is not a superfluous page."

THE ART OF PLUCK.—By SCRIBLERUS REDIVIVUS (Edward Caswall). New Edition. Royal 16mo, cloth extra, gilt top. 2s. 6d.

"The famous old 'Art of Pluck,'"—*Saturday Review*, and vide *Times*, *Speaker*, *Athenæum*, *Daily Chronicle*, and the whole press.

SPIRITUALISM.

The Autobiography of the greatest Living Medium.

THE CLAIRVOYANCE OF BESSIE WILLIAMS (Mrs. Russell Davies). With Preface by FLORENCE MARRYAT. Crown 8vo, with Portrait. 6s.

TRAVEL.

A WINTER JAUNT TO NORWAY. With Accounts (from personal acquaintance) of Nansen, Ibsen, Björnson, Brandes, etc.—*By* Mrs. ALEC TWEEDIE, Author of “A Girl’s Ride in Iceland,” and “The Passion Play at Oberammergau.” Fully Illustrated. Demy 8vo. 16s.

SOMERSETSHIRE: Highways, Byways, and Waterways. With about 150 Illustrations, and about 256 pages letterpress.—*By* CHARLES R. B. BARRETT, Author of “Essex: Highways, Byways, and Waterways.”

The above work is issued in two forms—

- (a) The ordinary edition in crown 4to, bound in cloth extra, with four copper-plate etchings, on Van Gelder paper. Price 21s.
- (b) A large paper edition, limited to 65 copies, numbered and signed by the author. This edition is in demy 4to, printed on the finest plate paper, and contains six copper-plate etchings. The work is sent in sheets, together with a portfolio containing a complete set of India proofs of the whole of the Illustrations. Price £2 2s. each, post free.

ALSO,

ONE UNIQUE COPY comprising, in addition to No. 1 of the fine paper edition an extra portfolio containing the whole of the original drawings, mounted. Both the copy and the two portfolios will be elaborately bound by ZAEHNSDORF. Price Fifty Guineas

CHILDREN'S BOOKS.

NURSERY LYRICS.

By Mrs. RICHARD STRACHEY.

WITH ILLUSTRATED BY G. P. JACOMB HOOD.

Imperial 16mo. Price 3s. 6d.

An alphabet designed by the artist is inserted in the volume so that the donor may cut out the child's initials and fix them in the spaces provided on the cover.

"Pretty quaint nursery rhymes. . . . Sweet and simple."—*St. James's Budget*.

"A funny little excellent book for children is this. . . . Will delight the small folks by day, and send them happily to bed at night."—*Black and White*.

"Will certainly haunt childish heads."—*Graphic*.

"Merry jingles."—*Times*.

THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ALMERO.

By WILHELMINA PICKERING.

ILLUSTRATED BY MARGARET HOOPER.

Second Edition. Fcap. 4to. Cloth Extra. Price 3s. 6d.

Opinion of the Press on the First Edition.

"An original and charming tale of the fairies of the sea, told with much grace, and riveting our interest throughout. The Author, in her preface, makes modest apologies for appearing in print; but no apology, indeed, is needed, and we shall hope to see more of her work."—*Athenæum*, November 29th, 1890.

HERCULES AND THE MARIONETTES.

By R. MURRAY GILCHRIST.

Illustrated. Fcap. 4to. 3s. 6d.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS (*continued*).

THE STORY BOOK SERIES.

Royal 16mo. Half-cloth extra, and Cupid
paper. 2s. 6d. Illustrated.

1.—STELLA.

By Mrs. G. S. REANEY.

"Much taste and good sense."—*Spectator*.

"An admirable gift-book for girls."—*British Weekly*.

"A dainty little volume . . . a charmingly-written story."—*Glasgow Herald*.

"Simply and prettily written."—*Scotsman*.

2.—MY AUNT CONSTANTIA JANE.

By MARY E. HULLAH.

"Pretty little book."—*Lady's Pictorial*.

"Gracefully imagined . . . prettily told . . . dainty illustrations."—*Scotsman*.

3.—LITTLE GLORY'S MISSION,

AND

NOT ALONE IN THE WORLD.

By Mrs. G. S. REANEY.

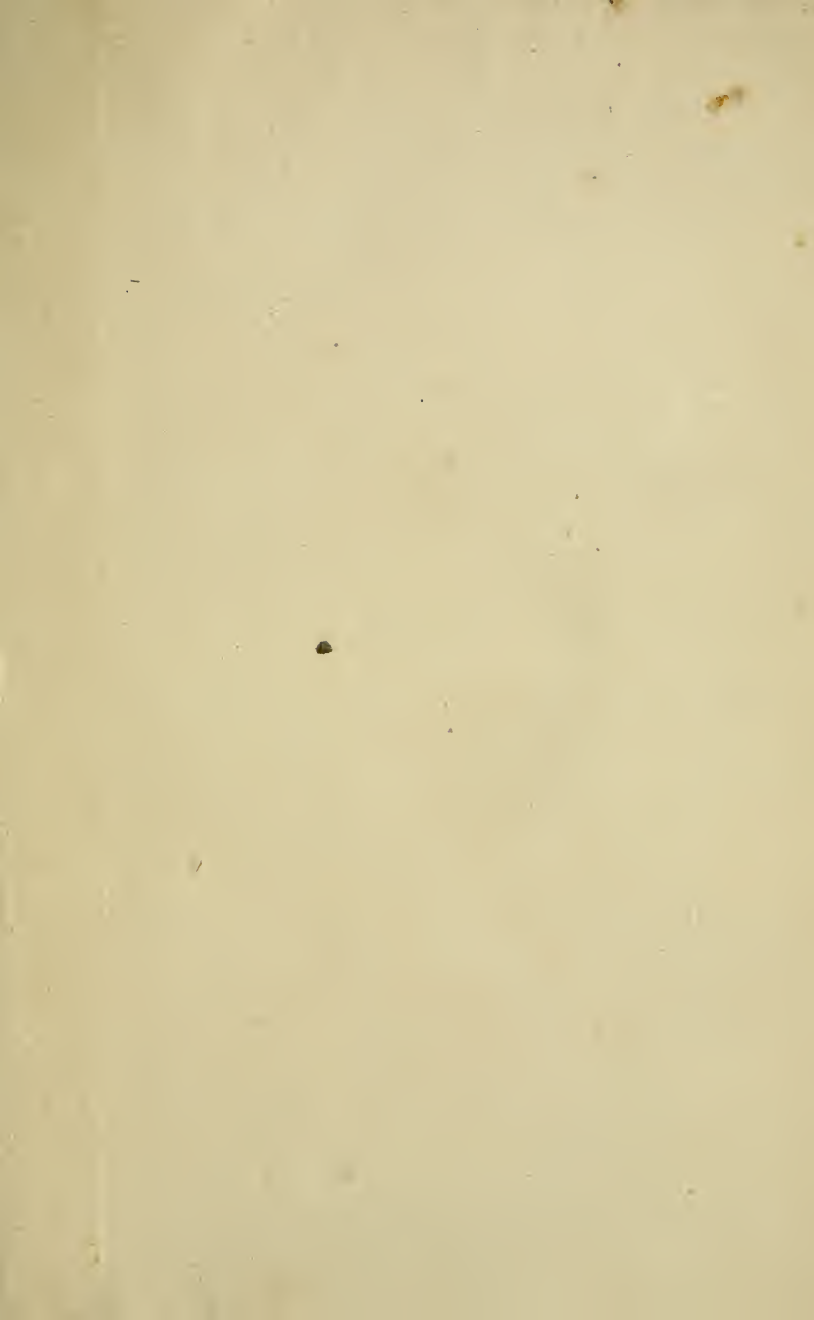
4.—HANS AND HIS FRIEND.

By MARY E. HULLAH.

MR. RUSKIN says :—

"I have read Miss Hullah's story with very great pleasure to myself, and heartily think she has the power to take good position and make her living very happily. It is of course a little founded on Andersen and other people . . . but she's very clever herself."





UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 041771491